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Around the Corner

VERY corner is the gateway to a mystery and every realized desire is the climax to an adventure of some sort. MYSTERY MAGAZINE turns a new corner twice a month—on the first and fifteenth—and the mysteries *it* solves are the realization of many desires in the field of fiction. Particularly is this true of what is to be found around MYSTERY MAGAZINE'S next corner.

In our next number—out April 15—

Elizabeth Herrick comes forward with a tensely dramatic novelette, that is simply and sufficiently entitled "Witness."

Lenore Ulric tells a true mystery story which is excellently reported by Bide Dudley.

Dale Collins, the inimitable, furnishes still another *Peter Lamb* story called "The Sidney Street Affair."

William Merriam Rouse solves a mystery of the Adirondacks and establishes one man's faith in womankind in a powerful tale that masquerades under the title of "The Big Boob."

And Harrison J. Holt, in a fantasy entitled "The Green Parrot," develops a new and startling excuse for Polly's ability to talk.

Altogether, our April 15 number will realize almost any reader's anticipations; and most particularly the anticipations of the kind of reader who likes his fiction to have the strength of attractive variety.

The Under Dog

By AGATHA CHRISTIE

A Complete Novelette

CHAPTER I.

AN EXCEPTIONAL CLEVERNESS

LILY MARGRAVE smoothed her gloves out on her knee with a nervous gesture, and darted a glance at the occupant of the big chair opposite her.

She had heard of M. Hercule Poirot, the well-known investigator, but this was the first time she had seen him in the flesh.

The comic almost ridiculous aspect that he presented disturbed her conception of him. Could this funny little man, with the egg-shaped head and the enormous mustaches, really do the wonderful things that were claimed for him? His occupation at the moment struck her as particularly childish. He was piling small blocks of colored wood one upon the other, and seemed far more interested in the result than he was in the story she was telling him.

At her sudden silence, however, he looked sharply across at her.

"*Mademoiselle*, continue, I pray of you. It is not that I do not attend; I attend very carefully, I assure you."

He began once more to pile the little blocks of wood one upon the other, while the girl's voice took up the tale again. It was a gruesome tale, a tale of violence and tragedy, but the voice was so calm and unemotional, the recital was so concise that something of the savor of humanity seemed to have been left out of it.

She stopped at last.

"I hope," she said anxiously, "that I have made everything clear."

Poirot nodded his head several times in emphatic assent. Then he swept his hand across the wooden blocks, scattering them over the table, and leaning back in his chair, his finger tips pressed together and his eyes on the ceiling, he began to recapitulate.

"SIR REUBEN ASTWELL was murdered ten days ago. On Wednesday, the day before yesterday, his nephew, Charles Leverson, was arrested by the police. The facts against him as far as you know are — you will correct me if I am wrong, *Mademoiselle.*"

"Sir Reuben was sitting up late writing in his own special sanctum, the Tower room. Mr. Leverson came in late, letting himself in with a latch key. He was overheard quarreling with his uncle by the butler, whose room was directly below the Tower room. The quarrel ended with a sudden thud as of a chair being thrown over and a half-smothered cry.

"The butler was alarmed, and thought of getting up to see what was the matter, but as a few seconds later he heard Mr. Leverson leave the room gaily whistling a tune, he thought nothing more of it. On the following morning, however, a housemaid discovered Sir Reuben dead by his desk. He had been struck down by some heavy instrument. The butler, I gather, did not at once tell the story to the police. That was natural, I think, eh, *Mademoiselle?*"

The sudden question made Lily Margrave start.

"I beg your pardon?" she said vaguely.

"One looks for humanity in these matters, does one not?" said the little man. "As you recited the story to me—so admirably, so concisely—you made of the actors in the drama machines—puppets. But me, I look always for human nature. I say to myself, this butler, this—what did you say his name was?"

"His name is Parsons," said Lily Margrave.

"This Parsons, then, he will have the characteristics of his class, he will object very strongly to the police, he will tell them as little as possible. Above all, he will say nothing that might seem to incriminate a member of the household. A house-breaker, a burglar, he will cling to that idea with all the strength of extreme obstinacy. Yes, the loyalties of the servant class are an extremely interesting study."

HE LEANED back beaming, his finger tips pressed together.

"In the meantime," he went on, "everyone in the household has told his or her tale, Mr. Leverson among the rest, and his tale was that he had come in late and gone up to bed without seeing his uncle."

"That is what he said," agreed Lily Margrave.

"And no one saw reason to doubt that tale," mused Poirot, "except, of course, Parsons. Then there comes down an inspector from Scotland Yard, Inspector Miller you said, did you not? I know him, I have come across him once or twice in the past. He is what they call the sharp man, the ferret, the weasel, the much praised individual who does not let the grass grow under his feet.

"Yes, I know him! And the sharp Inspector Miller, he sees what the local inspector has not seen, that Parsons is ill at ease and uncomfortable, and knows something that he has not told. *Eh bien,* he makes short work of Parsons. By now it has been clearly proved that no one broke into the house that night, that the murderer must be looked for inside the house and not outside. And Parsons is unhappy and frightened, and feels very relieved to have his secret knowledge drawn out of him.

"He has done his best to avoid scandal, but there are limits; and so Inspector Miller listens to Parsons' story, and asks a question or two, and then makes some private investigations of his own. The case he builds up is very strong—very strong indeed, *Mademoiselle.*

"Blood-stained fingers rested on the corner of the chest in the Tower room, and the finger-prints were those of Charles Leverson. The housemaid told him she emptied a basin of blood-stained water in Mr. Leverson's room the morning after the crime. He explained to her that he had cut his finger, and he *had* a little cut there, oh yes, but such a very little cut! The cuff of his evening shirt had been washed, but they found blood stains in the sleeve of his coat. He was hard pressed for money, and he inherited money at Sir Reuben's death. Oh, yes, a very strong case, *Mademoselle.*" He paused.

"And yet you come to me today."

Lily Margrave shrugged her slender shoulders.

"As I told you, M. Poirot, Lady Astwell sent me."

"You would not have come of your own accord, eh?"

The little man glanced at her shrewdly. The girl did not answer.

"You do not reply to my question, *Mademoiselle.*"

LILY MARGRAVE began smoothing her gloves again.

"It is rather difficult for me, M. Poirot. I have my loyalty to Lady Astwell to consider. Strictly speak-

ing, I am only her paid companion, but she has treated me more as though I were a daughter or a niece. She has been extraordinarily kind, and whatever her faults, I should not like to appear to criticise her actions, or—well, to prejudice you against taking up the case."

"Impossible to prejudice Hercule Poirot, *cela ne ce fait pas*," declared the little man cheerily. "I perceive that you think Lady Astwell has in her bonnet the buzzing bee. Come now, is it not so?"

"If I must say——"

"Speak, *Mademoiselle*."

"I think the whole thing is simply silly."

"It strikes you like that, eh?"

"I don't want to say anything against Lady Astwell——"

"I comprehend," murmured Poirot gently. "I comprehend perfectly."

His eyes invited her to go on. The girl yielded to his sympathetic and persuasive manner.

"She really is an awfully good sort, and frightfully kind, but she isn't—how can I put it? She isn't an educated woman. You know she was an actress when Sir Reuben married her, and she has all sorts of prejudices and superstitions. If she says a thing, it must be so, and she simply won't listen to reason. The Inspector was not very tactful with her, and it put her back up. She says it is nonsense to suspect Mr. Leverson and just the sort of stupid, pig-headed mistake the police would make, and that, of course, dear Charles did not do it."

"But she has no reasons, eh?"

"None whatever," said Miss Margrave very positively.

"Ha! is that so? really, now—well, I have met ladies like that before."

"I told her," said Lily, "that it would be no good coming to you with a mere statement like that and nothing to go on."

"You told her that," said Poirot, "did you really? That is interesting."

His eyes swept over Lily Margrave in a quick comprehensive survey, taking in the details of her neat black tailor-made, the touch of white at her throat, an expensive crêpe de chine blouse showing dainty tucks, and the smart little black felt hat. He saw the elegance of her, the pretty face with its slightly pointed chin, and the dark blue long-lashed eyes. Insensibly his attitude changed; he was interested now, not so much in the case as in the girl sitting opposite him.

"Lady Astwell is, I should imagine, *Mademoiselle*, just a trifle inclined to be unbalanced and hysterical?"

Lily Margrave nodded eagerly.

"That describes her exactly. She is, as I told you, very kind, but it is impossible to argue with her or to make her see things logically."

"Possibly she suspects someone on her own account," suggested Poirot, "someone quite absurd and impossible."

"That is exactly what she does do," cried Lily. "She has taken a great dislike to Sir Reuben's secretary, poor man. She says she *knows* he did it, and yet it has been proved quite conclusively that poor Mr. Trefusis cannot possibly have had anything to do with it."

"And she has no reasons?"

"Of course not; it is all intuition with her."

Lily Margrave's voice was very scornful.

"I perceive, *Mademoiselle*," said Poirot, smiling, "that you do not believe in intuition?"

"I think it is nonsense," replied Lily frankly.

POIROT leaned back in his chair.

"*Les femmes*," he murmured, "they like to think that it is a special weapon that the good God has given them, and for every once that it shows

them the truth, at least nine times it leads them astray."

"I know," said Lily, "but I have told you what Lady Astwell is like. You simply cannot argue with her."

"So you, *Mademoiselle,* being wise and discreet, came along to me as you were bidden, and have managed to put me *au courant* of the situation."

Something in the tone of his voice made the girl look up sharply, but Hercule Poirot's gaze was fixed innocently upon the ceiling.

"Of course, I know," said Lily apologetically, "how very valuable your time is."

"You are too flattering, *Mademoiselle,*" said Poirot, "but indeed—yes, it is true, at this present time I have many cases of moment on hand."

"I was afraid that might be so," said Lily, rising. "I will tell Lady Astwell——"

But Poirot did not rise also. Instead he lay back in his chair and looked steadily up at the girl.

"You are in haste to be gone, *Mademoiselle?* Sit down one more little moment, I pray of you."

He saw the color flood into her face and ebb out again. She sat down once more slowly and unwillingly.

"*Mademoiselle* is quick and decisive," said Poirot. "She must make allowances for an old man like myself, who comes to his decisions slowly. You mistook me, *Mademoiselle.* I did not say that I would not go down to Lady Astwell."

"You will come, then?"

The girl's tone was flat. She did not look at Poirot, but down at the ground, and so was unaware of the keen scrutiny with which he regarded her. At last he nodded his head as though replying to some question in his own mind.

"Tell Lady Astwell, *Mademoiselle,* that I am entirely at her service. I will be at—Mon Repos, is it not?—this afternoon."

HE ROSE briskly to his feet. The girl followed suit.

"I—I will tell her. It is very good of you to come, M. Poirot. I am afraid, though, you will find you have been brought on a wild goose chase."

"Very likely, but—who knows?"

He saw her out with punctilious courtesy to the door. Then he returned to the sitting-room, frowning, deep in thought. Once or twice he nodded his head, then he opened the door of the bedroom adjoining and called to his valet.

"My good George, prepare me, I pray of you, a little valise. I go down to the country this afternoon for several days."

"Very good, sir," said George.

He was an extremely English-looking person. Tall, cadaverous and unemotional.

"A young girl is a very interesting phenomenon, George," said Poirot, as he dropped once more into his arm-chair and lighted a tiny cigarette. "Especially, you understand, when, she has brains. To ask someone to do a thing and at the same time to put them against doing it, that is a delicate operation. It requires finesse. She was very adroit—oh, very adroit—but Hercule Poirot, my good George, is of a cleverness quite exceptional."

"I have heard you say so, sir," said George.

"It is not the secretary she has in mind," mused Poirot. "Lady Astwell's accusation of him she treats with contempt. Just the same she is anxious that no one should disturb the sleeping dogs. I, my good George, I go to disturb them, I go to make the dog fight! There is a drama there, at Mon Repos. A human drama, and it excites me. She was adroit, the little one, but not adroit enough. I wonder—I wonder what I shall find there?"

Into the dramatic pause which

succeeded these words George's voice broke apologetically:

"Shall I pack dress clothes, sir?"

Poirot looked at him sadly, shaking his head.

"Always the concentration, the attention to your own job. You are very good for me, George. You are so exceedingly English."

CHAPTER II

THE BEST AND THE WORST

WHEN the 4.55 drew up at Abbots Cross station, there descended from it M. Hercule Poirot, very neatly and foppishly attired, his mustaches waxed to a stiff point. He gave up his ticket, passed through the barrier, and was accosted by a tall chauffeur.

"Mr. Poirot?"

The little man beamed upon him.

"That is my name."

"This way, sir, if you please."

He held open the door of the big Rolls Royce limousine. Poirot got in and noted the luxury of the upholstery with approval.

The house was a bare three minutes from the station. The chauffeur descended once more and opened the door of the car, and Poirot stepped out. The butler was already holding the front door open.

Poirot gave the outside of the house a swift appraising glance before passing through the open door. It was a big, solidly built red brick mansion, with no pretensions to beauty, but with an air of solid comfort. It stood quite near the road, approached, as house agents are wont to term it, by a short carriage drive. Four or five acres of garden stretched away behind it. It was a house typical of Abbots Cross, which is fifty minutes by rail from London, and scorns to call itself a suburb.

Poirot stepped into the hall. The butler relieved him deftly of his hat and overcoat, then murmured with that deferential undertone only to be achieved by the best servants:

"Her Ladyship is expecting you, sir. I was to take you to her as soon as you arrived."

POIROT followed the butler up the soft carpeted stairs. This, without doubt, was Parsons, a very well-trained servant, with a manner suitably devoid of emotion. At the top of the staircase he turned to the right along a corridor. He passed through a door into a little anteroom, from which two more doors led. He threw open the left-hand one of these, and announced:

"M. Poirot, m'lady."

The room was not a very large one, and it was crowded with furniture and knicknacks. A woman, dressed in black, got up from a sofa by the fireplace and came quickly toward Poirot. Lady Astwell was a big, highly complexioned woman. She retained traces of a past beauty of no mean order, but she was the kind who runs to fat, and her weight would look worse in print than in actuality.

"M. Poirot," she said with outstretched hand. Her eyes ran rapidly over the dandified figure. She paused a minute, ignoring the little man's bow over her hand, and his murmured "My Lady," and then, releasing his hand after a sudden vigorous pressure, she exclaimed:

"I believe in small men! They are the clever ones."

"Inspector Miller," murmured Poirot, "is, I think, a tall man?"

"He is a bumptious idiot," said Lady Astwell. "Sit down here by me, will you, M. Poirot?"

She indicated the sofa and went on:

"Lily did her best to put me off sending for you, but I have not come

to my time of life without knowing my own mind."

"A rare accomplishment," said Poirot, as he followed her to the settee.

LADY ASTWELL settled herself comfortably among the cushions and turned so as to face him. The light from the west window fell full on her face and her henna red hair, and glinted in her eyes, that were still dark blue and beautiful.

"Lily is a dear girl," said Lady Astwell, "but she thinks she knows everything, and as often as not in my experience those sort of people are wrong. I am not clever, M. Poirot, I never have been, but I am right where many a more stupid person is wrong. I believe in *guidance*. Now do you want me to tell you who is the murderer, or do you not? A woman knows, M. Poirot."

"Does Miss Margrave know?" asked Poirot.

"What did she tell you?" asked Lady Astwell sharply.

"She gave me the facts of the case," said Poirot.

"The facts? Oh, of course they are dead against Charles, but I tell you, M. Poirot, he didn't do it. I know he didn't."

She bent upon him an earnestness that was almost disconcerting.

"You are very positive, Lady Astwell?"

"Trefusis killed my husband, M. Poirot. I am sure of it."

"Why?"

"Why should he kill him, do you mean, or why am I sure? I tell you I know it. I am funny about those things. I made up my mind at once, and I stick to it."

"Did Mr. Trefusis benefit in any way by Sir Reuben's death?"

"Never left him a penny," returned Lady Astwell promptly. "Now that shows you dear Reuben couldn't have liked or trusted him."

"Had he been with Sir Reuben long, then?"

"Close on nine years."

"That is a long time," said Poirot softly, "a very long time to remain in the employment of one man. Yes, Mr. Trefusis, he must have known his employer well."

Lady Astwell stared at him.

"What are you driving at? I don't see what that has to do with it."

"I was following out a little idea of my own," said Poirot. "A little idea, not interesting, perhaps, but original, on the effects of service."

Lady Astwell still stared.

"You are very clever, aren't you?" she said in rather a doubtful tone. "Everybody says so."

Hercule Poirot laughed.

"Perhaps you shall pay me that compliment, too, Madame, one of these days. But let us return to the motive. Tell me now of your household, of the people who were here in the house on the day of the tragedy."

"There was Charles, of course," said Astwell.

"He was your husband's nephew, I understand, not yours."

"Yes, Charles was the only son of Reuben's sister. She married a comparatively rich man, but one of those crashes came; they do in the city, and he died, and his wife, too, and Charles came to live with us. He was twenty-three at the time, and going to be a barrister. But when the trouble came, Reuben took him into his office.

"He was industrious, M. Charles?" hinted Poirot.

"I like a man who is quick in the uptake," said Lady Astwell with a nod of approval. "No, that's just the trouble, Charles was *not* industrious. He was always having rows with his uncle over some muddle or other that he had made. Not that poor Reuben

was an easy man to get on with. Many's the time I've told him that he had forgotten what it was to be young himself. He was very different in those days, M. Poirot."

Lady Astwell heaved a sigh of reminiscence.

"When I think of that time in Manchester when he first saw me. You know I was in the chorus of the Pantomime then? Ah, yes, very different in those days." She sighed again.

"Changes must come, Milady," said Poirot. "It is the law."

"Still," said Lady Astwell, "he was never really rude to me. At least if he was, he was always sorry afterward—poor dear Reuben."

"He was difficult, eh?" said Poirot.

"*I* could always manage him," said Lady Astwell with the air of a successful lion tamer. "But it was rather awkward sometimes when he would lose his temper with the servants. There are ways of doing it, and Reuben's was not the right way."

"How exactly did Sir Reuben leave his money, Lady Astwell?"

"Half to me and half to Charles," replied Lady Astwell promptly. "The lawyers don't put it simply like that, of course, but that's what it amounts to."

POIROT nodded his head thoughtfully.

"I see—I see," he murmured. "Now, Lady Astwell, I will demand of you that you will describe to me the household. There was yourself, and Sir Reuben's nephew, Mr. Charles Leverson, and the secretary, Mr. Owen Trefusis, and there was Miss Lily Margrave. Perhaps you will tell me something of that young lady."

"You want to know about Lily."

"Yes, she has been with you long?"

"About a year. I have had a lot of secretary-companions, you know, but somehow or other they all got on my nerves. Lily was different. She was tactful and full of commonsense, and besides she looks so nice. I do like to have a pretty face about me, M. Poirot. I am a funny kind of person; I take likes and dislikes straight away. As soon as I saw that girl, I said to myself: 'She'll do.'"

"Did she come to you through friends, Lady Astwell?"

"I think she answered an advertisement. Yes—that was it."

"You know something of her people, of where she comes from?"

"Her father and mother are out in India, I believe. I don't really know much about them, but you can see at a glance that Lily is a lady, can't you, M. Poirot?"

"Oh perfectly, perfectly."

"Of course," went on Lady Astwell, "I am not a lady myself. I know it, and the servants know it, but there is nothing mean-spirited about me. I can appreciate the real thing when I see it, and no one could be nicer than Lily has been to me. I look upon that girl almost as a daughter, M. Poirot, indeed I do."

POIROT'S right hand strayed out and straightened one or two of the objects lying on a little table near him.

"Did Sir Reuben share his feeling?" he asked.

His eyes were on the knicknacks, but doubtless he noted the pause before Lady Astwell's answer came.

"With a man it's different. Of course they—they got on very well together."

"Thank you, Madame," said Poirot. He was smiling to himself.

"And these were the only people in the house that night?" he asked, "excepting, of course, the servants."

"Oh, there was Victor," said Lady Astwell.

"Victor?"

"Yes, my husband's brother, you know, and his partner."

"He lived with you?"

"No, he had just arrived on a visit. He has been out in West Africa for the past few years."

"West Africa," murmured Poirot reflectively.

He had learned that Lady Astwell could be trusted to develop a subject herself if sufficient time was given her.

"They say it's a wonderful country, but I think it's the kind of place that has a very bad effect upon a man. They drink too much, and they get uncontrolled. None of the Astwells have good tempers, and Victor's, since he came back from Africa, has been simply too shocking. He has frightened *me* once or twice."

"Did he frighten Miss Margrave, I wonder?" murmured Poirot gently.

"Lily? Oh, I don't think he has seen much of Lily."

Poirot made a note or two in a diminutive notebook, then he put the pencil back in its loop and returned the notebook to his pocket as he rose to his feet.

"I thank you, Lady Astwell. I will now, if I may, interview the good Parsons."

"Will you have him up here?"

Lady Astwell's hand moved toward the bell. Poirot arrested the gesture quickly.

"No, no, a thousand times no. I will descend to him."

"If you think it is better——"

Lady Astwell was clearly disappointed at not being able to participate in the forthcoming scene. Poirot adopted an air of mysterious secrecy.

"It is essential," he said mysteriously, and left Lady Astwell duly impressed.

HE FOUND Parsons in the butler's pantry, polishing silver. Poirot opened the proceedings with one of his funny little bows.

"I must explain myself," he said. "I am a detective agent."

"Yes, sir," said Parsons, "we gathered as much."

His tone was respectful but aloof.

"Lady Astwell sent for me," continued Poirot. "She is not satisfied; no, she is not satisfied at all."

"I have heard her Ladyship say so on several occasions," said Parsons.

"In fact," said Poirot, "I recount to you the things you already know? Eh? Let us then not waste time on these bagatelles. Take me, if you will be so good, to your bedroom and tell me exactly what it was you heard there on the night of the murder."

The butler's room was on the ground floor, adjoining the servant's hall. It had barred windows, and the strong room was in one corner of it. Parsons indicated the narrow bed with an unconsciously dramatic gesture.

"I had retired, sir, at 11 o'clock. Miss Margrave had gone to bed, and Lady Astwell was with Sir Reuben in the Tower room."

"Lady Astwell was with Sir Reuben? Ah, proceed."

"The Tower room, sir, is directly over this. If people are talking in it one can hear the murmur of voices, but naturally not anything that is said. I must have fallen asleep about half past eleven. It was just 12 o'clock when I was awakened by the sound of the front door being slammed to and knew Mr. Leverson had returned. Presently I heard footsteps overhead, and a minute or two later Mr. Leverson's voice talking to Sir Reuben.

"It was my fancy at the time, sir, that Mr. Leverson was—I should not exactly like to say drunk, but inclined to be a little indiscreet and noisy. He was shouting at his uncle

at the top of his voice. I caught a word or two here or there, but not enough to understand what it was all about, and then there was a sharp cry, a sort of yell more than anything else, and a heavy thud."

There was a pause, and Parsons repeated the last words in evident self-approval.

"A heavy thud," he said impressively.

"If I mistake not, it is a *dull* thud in most works of romance," murmured Poirot.

"Maybe, sir," said Parsons severely. "It was a *heavy* thud I heard."

"A thousand pardons," said Poirot.

"Do not mention it, sir. After the thud, in the silence, I heard Mr. Leverson's voice as plain as plain can be, raised high. 'My God,' he said, 'My God,' just like that, sir."

PARSONS, from his first reluctance to tell the tale, had now progressed to a thorough enjoyment of it. He fancied himself mightily as a narrator. Poirot played up to him.

"*Mon Dieu,*" he murmured. "What emtion you must have experienced!"

"Yes, indeed, sir," said Parsons, "as you say, sir. Not that I thought very much of it at the time. But it *did* occur to me to wonder if anything was amiss, and whether I had better go up and see. I went to turn the electric light on, and was unfortunate enough to knock over a chair. To tell you the truth, I barked my shins on it pretty severely.

"I opened the door, and went through the servants' hall, and opened the other door which gives on a passage. The backstairs lead up from there, and as I stood at the bottom of them hesitating, I heard Mr. Leverson's voice from up above, speaking hearty and cheery-like. 'No harm done, luckily,' he says, 'Goodnight,' and I heard him move off along the passage to his own room, whistling cheerily.

"Of course I went back to bed at once. Just something knocked over, that's all I thought it was. I ask you, sir, was I to think Sir Reuben was murdered, with Mr. Leverson saying goodnight and all?"

"You are sure it was Mr. Leverson's voice you heard?"

Parsons looked at the little Belgian pityingly, and Poirot saw clearly enough that, right or wrong, Parsons' mind was made up on this point.

"Is there anything further you would like to ask me, sir?"

"There is one thing," said Poirot, "do you like Mr. Leverson?"

"I—I beg your pardon, sir?"

"It is a simple question. Do you like Mr. Leverson?"

Parsons, from being startled at first, now seemed embarrassed.

"The general opinion in the servants' hall, sir," he said, and paused.

"By all means," said Poirot, "put it that way if it pleases you."

"The opinion is, sir, that Mr. Leverson is an open-handed young gentleman, but not, if I may say so, particularly intelligent, sir."

"Ah!" said Poirot. "Do you know, Parsons, that without having seen him, that is also precisely my opinion of Mr. Leverson."

"Indeed, sir."

"What is your opinion—I beg your pardon—the opinion of the servants' hall of the secretary, M. Trefusis?"

"He is a very quiet, patient gentleman, sir. Anxious to give no trouble."

"*Vraiment,*" said Poirot.

The butler coughed.

"Her Ladyship, sir," he murmured, "is apt to be a little hasty in her judgments."

"Then, in the opinion of the ser-

vants' hall, Mr. Leverson committed the crime?"

"We none of us wish to think it was Mr. Leverson," said Parsons.

"We—well, plainly, we didn't think he had it in him, sir."

"But he has a somewhat violent temper, has he not?" asked Poirot.

Parsons came nearer to him.

"If you are asking me who had the most violent temper in the house—"

Poirot held up a hand to arrest him.

"Ah! but that is not the question I should ask," he said softly. "My question would be, who has the best temper."

Parsons stared at him open-mouthed.

CHAPTER III

GEORGE'S AUNT JEMIMA

IT HAS been said of Hercule Poirot that he took a distinct pleasure in mystifying people. He has been accused of deliberately wrapping up his meaning in obscure sentences. In this case, he noted with satisfaction that Parsons' mouth remained open, and that an expression of utter bewilderment rested on the butler's countenance.

Poirot wasted no further time on him. With an amiable little bow—he was always amiable—he left the room and wandered out into the big square hall of Mon Repos. There he stood a minute or two in thought, then, at a slight sound that came to him, cocked his head on one side in the manner of a perky robin, and finally, with noiseless steps, crossed to one of the doors that led out of the hall.

He stood in the doorway, looking into the room; a small room furnished as a library. At a big desk at the further end of it sat a thin, pale young man busily writing. He had a receding chin, and wore pince-nez.

Poirot watched him for some minutes, and then he broke the silence by giving a completely artificial and theatrical cough.

"Ahem!" coughed M. Hercule Poirot.

The young man at the desk stopped writing and turned his head. He did not appear unduly startled, but an expression of perplexity gathered on his face as he eyed Poirot.

The latter came forward with a little bow.

"I have the honor of speaking to M. Trefusis, yes? Ah! my name is Poirot, Hercule Poirot. You may perhaps have heard of me."

"Oh—er—yes, certainly," said the young man.

Poirot eyed him attentively.

OWEN TREFUSIS was about thirty-three years of age, and the detective saw at once why nobody was inclined to treat Lady Astwell's accusation seriously. Mr. Owen Trefusis was a prim, proper young man, disarmingly meek, the type of man who can be, and is, systematically bullied. One could feel quite sure that he would never display resentment.

"Lady Astwell sent for you, of course," said the secretary. "She mentioned that she was going to do so. Is there any way in which I can help you?"

His manner was polite without being effusive. Poirot accepted a chair, and murmured gently:

"Has Lady Astwell said anything to you of her beliefs and suspicions?"

Owen Trefusis smiled a little.

"As far as that goes," he said, "I believe she suspects me. It is absurd, but there it is. She has hardly spoken a civil word to me since, and she shrinks against the wall as I pass by in the most approved melodramatic fashion."

His manner was perfectly natural, and there was more amusement than resentment in his voice. Poirot

nodded with an air of engaging frankness.

"Between ourselves," he explained, "she said the same thing to me. I did not argue with her—me, I have made it a rule never to argue with very positive ladies. You comprehend, it is a waste of time."

"Oh, quite."

"I say, yes, Milady—oh, perfectly, Milady—*precisement*, Milady. They mean nothing, those words, but they soothe all the same. I make my investigations, for though it seems almost impossible that anyone except M. Leverson could have committed the crime, yet—well, the impossible has happened before now."

"I understand your position perfectly," said the secretary. "Please regard me as entirely at your service."

"*Bon*," said Poirot. "We understand one another. Now recount to me the events of that evening. Better start with dinner."

"LEVERSON was not at dinner, as you doubtless know," said the secretary. "He had a serious disagreement with his uncle, and went off to dine at the Golf Club. Sir Reuben was in a very bad temper in consequence."

"Not too amiable *ca Monsieur*, eh?" hinted Poirot delicately.

Trefusis laughed.

"Oh! he was a Tartar! I haven't worked with him for nine years without knowing most of his little ways. He was an extraordinarily difficult man, M. Poirot. He would get into childish fits of rage and abuse anybody who came near him. I was used to it by that time. I got into the habit of paying absolutely no attention to anything he said. He was not bad-hearted really, but he could be most foolish and exasperating in his manner. The great thing was never to answer him back."

"Were other people as wise as you were in that respect?"

Trefusis shrugged his shoulders.

"Lady Astwell enjoyed a good row," he said. "She was not in the least afraid of Sir Reuben, and she always stood up to him and gave him as good as she got. They always made up afterward, and Sir Reuben was really devoted to her."

"Did they quarrel that last night?" asked Poirot suddenly.

The secretary looked at him sideways, hesitated a minute, then he said:

"I believe so," he said; "what made you ask?"

"An idea, that is all."

"I don't know, of course," explained the secretary, "but things looked as though they were working up that way. I know the signs pretty well by now."

Poirot did not pursue the topic.

"Who else was at dinner?"

"Miss Margrave, Mr. Victor Astwell and myself."

"And afterward?"

"We went into the drawing-room. Sir Reuben did not accompany us. About ten minutes later he came in and hauled me over the coals for some trifling matter about a letter. I went up with him to the Tower room and set the thing straight, then Mr. Victor Astwell came in and said he had something he wished to talk to his brother about, so I went downstairs and joined the two ladies.

"About a quarter of an hour later I heard Sir Reuben's bell ringing violently, and Parsons came to say I was to go up to Sir Reuben at once. As I entered the room, Mr. Victor Astwell was coming out. He nearly knocked me over. Something had evidently happened to upset him. He has a very violent temper. I really believe he didn't see me."

"Did Sir Reuben make any comment on the matter?"

"He said: 'Victor is a lunatic; he

will do for somebody some day when he is in one of these rages."

"Ah!" said Poirot. "Have you any idea what the trouble was about?"

"I couldn't say at all."

POIROT turned his head very slowly and looked at the secretary. Those last words had been uttered too hastily. He formed the conviction that Trefusis could have said more had he wished to do so. But once again Poirot did not press the question.

"And then? Proceed, I pray of you."

"I worked with Sir Reuben for about an hour and a half. At 11 o'clock Lady Astwell came in, and Sir Reuben told me I could go to bed."

"And you went?"

"Yes."

"Have you any idea how long she stayed with him?"

"None at all. Her room is on the first floor, and mine is on the second, so I would not hear her go to bed in any case."

"I see."

Poirot nodded his head once or twice and sprang to his feet.

"And now, *Monsieur*, take me to the Tower room."

HE FOLLOWED the secretary up the broad stairs to the first landing. Here Trefusis led him along the corridor, and through a baize door at the end of it, which gave on the servants' staircase and on a short passage that ended in a door. They passed through this door and found themselves on the scene of the crime.

It was a lofty room twice as high as any of the others, and was roughly about thirty feet square. Swords and assegais adorned the walls, and many native curios were arranged about on tables. At the far end, in the embrasure of the window, was a large writing table. Poirot crossed straight to it.

"It was here Sir Reuben was found, eh?"

Trefusis nodded.

"He was struck from behind, I unde stand?"

Again the secretary nodded.

"The crime was committed with one of these native clubs," he explained. "A tremendously heavy thing. Death must have been practically instantaneous."

"That strengthens the conviction that the crime was not premeditated. A sharp quarrel, and a weapon snatched up almost unconsciously."

"Yes, it does not look well for poor Leverson."

"And the body was found fallen forward on the desk?"

"No, it had slipped sideways to the ground."

"Ah," said Poirot, "it is curious, that."

"Why curious?" asked the secretary sharply.

"Because of this."

Poirot pointed to a round irregular stain on the polished surface of the writing table.

"That is a blood stain, *mon ami*," he said, nodding his head sagely.

"It may have splattered there," suggested Trefusis, "or it may have been made later, when they moved the body."

"Very possibly, very possibly," said the little man. "There is only the one door to this room?"

"There is a staircase here."

TREFUSIS pulled aside a velvet curtain in the corner of the room nearest the door, where a small spiral staircase led upward.

"This place was originally built by an astronomer. The stairs lead up to the tower where the telescope was fixed. Sir Reuben had the place fitted up as a bedroom, and sometimes slept there if he was working very late."

Poirot went nimbly up the steps.

The circular room upstairs was plainly furnished, with a camp bed, a chair and dressing-table. Poirot satisfied himself that there was no other exit, and then came down again to where Trefusis stood waiting for him.

"Did you hear Mr. Leverson come in?" he asked.

Trefusis shook his head.

"I was fast asleep by that time."

Poirot nodded. He looked slowly round the room.

"Eh bien!" he said at last. "I do not think there is anything further here, unless—perhaps you would be so kind as to draw the curtains."

Obediently Trefusis pulled the heavy black curtains across the window at the far end of the room. Poirot switched on the light—which was masked by a big alabaster bowl hanging from the ceiling.

"There was a desk light?" he asked.

For reply the secretary clicked on a powerful green-shaded hand lamp, which stood on the writing table. Poirot switched the other light off, then on, then off again. Finally, he grunted approval.

"C'est bien! I have finished here."

He passed out of the room.

"Dinner is at half-past seven," murmured the secretary.

"I thank you, M. Trefusis, for your many amiabilities."

"Not at all."

Poirot went thoughtfully along the corridor to the room appointed for him. The immovable George was there laying out his master's dress things. Poirot sat down in an armchair in front of the fire.

"MY GOOD George," he said presently, "I shall, I hope, meet at dinner a certain gentleman who begins to intrigue me greatly. A man who has come home from the tropics, George. With a tropical temper—so it is said. A man whom Parsons tries to tell me about, and whom Lily Margrave does not mention. The late Sir Reuben had a temper of his own, George. Supposing such a man to come into contact with a man whose temper was worse than his own—how do you say it? The fur would jump about, eh?"

" 'Would fly' is the correct expression, sir, and it is not always the case, sir, not by a long way."

"No?"

Poirot's tone was encouraging.

"No, sir. There was my Aunt Jemima, sir, a most shrewish tongue she had, bullied a poor sister of hers who lived with her, something shocking she did. Nearly worried the life out of her. But if anyone came along who stood up to her, well, it was a very different thing. It was meekness she couldn't bear."

"Ha!" said Poirot, "it is suggestive—that."

George coughed apologetically.

"Is there anything I can do in any way," he inquired delicately, "to—er—assist you, sir?"

"Certainly," said Poirot promptly. "You can find out for me what color evening dress Miss Lily Margrave wore that night, and which housemaid attends her."

George received these commands with his usual stolidity.

"Very good, sir, I will have the information for you in the morning."

Poirot rose from his seat and stood gazing into the fire, while George relieved him dexterously of his coat.

"You are very useful to me, George," he murmured. "Do you know, I shall not forget your Aunt Jemima?"

CHAPTER IV

AN INTEREST IN MINES

POIROT did not, after all, see Victor Astwell that night. A telephone message came from him that he was detained in London.

"He attends to the affairs of your late husband's business, eh?" asked Poirot of Lady Astwell.

"Victor is a partner," she explained. "He went out to Africa to look into some mining concessions for the firm. It *was* mining, wasn't it, Lily?"

"Yes, Lady Astwell."

"Gold mines, I think, or was it copper or tin? You ought to know, Lily, you were always asking Reuben questions about it all. Oh, do be careful, dear, you will have that vase over!"

"It is dreadfully hot in here with the fire," said the girl. "Shall I—shall I open the window a little?"

"If you like, dear," said Lady Astwell placidly.

Poirot watched while the girl went across to the window and opened it. She stood there a minute or two breathing in the cool night air. When she returned and sat down in her seat, Poirot said to her politely:

"So *Mademoiselle* is interested in mines?"

"Oh, not really," said the girl indifferently. "I listened to Sir Reuben, but I don't know anything about the subject."

"You pretended very well, then," said Lady Astwell. "Poor Reuben actually thought you had some ulterior motive in asking him all those questions."

THE little detective's eyes had not moved from the fire, into which he was steadily staring, but nevertheless, he did not miss the quick flush of vexation on Lily Margrave's face. Tactfully he changed the conversation. When the hour for good-nights came, Poirot said to his hostess:

"May I have just two little words with you, Madame?"

Lily Margrave vanished discreetly. Lady Astwell looked inquiringly at the detective.

"You were the last person to see Sir Reuben alive that night, Lady Astwell?"

She nodded. Tears sprang into her eyes, and she hastily held a black-edged handkerchief to them.

"Ah, do not distress yourself, I beg of you do not distress yourself."

"It's all very well, M. Poirot, but I can't help it."

"I am a triple imbecile thus to vex you."

"No, no, go on. What were you going to say?"

"It was about 11 o'clock, I fancy, when you went into the Tower room, and Sir Reuben dismissed Mr. Trefusis. Is that right?"

"It must have been about then," she agreed.

"How long were you with him?"

"It was just a quarter to twelve when I got up to my room; I remembered glancing at the clock on my mantelpiece."

"Lady Astwell, will you tell me what your conversation with your husband was about?"

Lady Astwell sank down on the sofa and broke down completely. Her sobs were vigorous and convincing.

"We—qua—qua—quarreled," she moaned.

"What about?" Poirot's voice was coaxing, almost tender.

"L—l—lots of things. It b—b—began with L—Lily. Reuben took a dislike to her—for no reason, and said he had caught her interfering with his papers. He wanted to send her away, and I said she was a dear girl, and I would not have it. And then he s—s—started shouting me down, and I wouldn't have that, so I just told him what I thought of him.

"Not that I really meant it, M. Poirot, and he said he had taken me out of the gutter to marry me, and I said—ah, but what does it all matter now. I shall never forgive myself. You know how it is, M. Poirot, I al-

ways did say a good row clears the air, and how was I to know someone was going to murder him that very night? Poor old Reuben, with the best heart in the world underneath his spoilt child ways."

Poirot had listened sympathetically to all this outburst. At intervals he had interposed soothing murmurs. Now, as Lady Astwell wiped her eyes and turned her swollen face toward him, he took her hand and patted it gently.

"I have caused you suffering," he said. "I apologize. Let us now be very business-like—very practical, very exact. You still cling to your idea that Mr. Trefusis murdered your husband?"

Lady Astwell drew herself up.

"A woman's instinct, M. Poirot," she said solemnly, "never lies."

"Exactly, exactly," said Poirot. "But when did he do it?"

"When? After I left him, of course."

"You left Sir Reuben at a quarter to twelve. At five minutes to twelve Mr. Leverson came in. In that ten minutes you say the secretary came down from his bedroom and murdered him?"

"It is perfectly possible," said Lady Astwell.

"So many things are possible," said Poirot. "It could be done in ten minutes. Oh, yes! But was it?"

"Of course he *says* he was in bed and fast asleep," said Lady Astwell, "but who is to know if he was or not?"

"Nobody saw him about," Poirot reminded her.

"Everybody was in bed and fast asleep," said Lady Astwell triumphantly. "Of course nobody saw him."

"I wonder," said Poirot to himself. very softly, "yes, I wonder."

A short pause.

"*Eh bien,* Lady Astwell, I will wish you good night."

CHAPTER V.

DARK RED ON LIGHT GREEN

GEORGE deposited a tray of early morning coffee by his master's bedside.

"Miss Margrave, sir, wore a dress of light green chiffon on the night in question."

"Thank you, George, you are most reliable."

"The third housemaid looks after Miss Margrave, sir. Her name is Gladys."

"Thank you, George. You are invaluable."

"Not at all, sir."

"It is a fine morning," said Poirot, looking out of the window, "and no one is likely to be astir very early. I think, my good George, that we shall have the Tower room to ourselves if we proceed there to make a little experiment."

"You need me, sir?"

"The experiment," said Poirot, "will not be painful."

The curtains were still drawn in the Tower room when they arrived there. George was about to pull them, when Poirot restrained him.

"We will leave the room as it is. Just turn on the desk lamp."

The valet obeyed.

"Now, my good George, sit down in that chair. Dispose yourself as though were were writing. *Très bien.* Me, I seize a club, I steal up behin you, so, and I hit you on the back of the head."

"Yes, sir," said George.

"Ah!" said Poirot, "but when I hit you, do not continue to write. You comprehend I cannot be exact. I cannot hit you with the same force with which the assassin hit Sir Reuben. When it comes to that point, we must do the make-believe. I hit

you on the head, and you collapse, so. The arms well relaxed, the body limp. Permit me to arrange you. But no, do not flex your muscles."

He heaved a sigh of exasperation.

"You press admirably the trousers, George," he said, "but the imagination you possess it not. Get up and let me take your place."

Poirot in his turn sat down at the writing table.

"I write," he declared, "I write busily. You steal up behind me, you hit me on the head with the club. Crash! The pen slips from my fingers, I drop forward, but not very far forward, for the chair is low, and the desk is high, and, moreover, my arms support me. Have the goodness, George, to go back to the door, stand there, and tell me what you see."

"Ahem!"

"Yes, George?" encouragingly.

"I see you, sir, sitting at the desk."

"*Sitting* at the desk?"

"It is a little difficult to see plainly, sir," explained George, "being such a long way away, sir, and the lamp being so heavily shaded. If I might turn on this light, sir?"

His hand reached out to the switch.

"Not at all," said Poirot sharply. "We shall do very well as we are. Here am I bending over the desk, there are you standing by the door. Advance now, George, advance, and put your hand on my shoulder."

George obeyed.

"Lean on me a little, George, to steady yourself on your feet, as it were. Ah! *Voila.*"

Hercule Poirot's limp body slid artistically sideways.

"I collapse—so!" he observed. "Yes, it is very well imagined. There is now something most important that must be done."

"Indeed, sir?" said the valet.

"Yes, it is necessary that I should breakfast well."

The little man laughed heartily at his own joke.

"The stomach, George; it must not be ignored."

GEORGE maintained a disapproving silence. Poirot went downstairs chuckling happily to himself. He was pleased at the way things were shaping. After breakfast he made the acquaintance of Gladys, the third housemaid. He was very interested in what she could tell him of the crime. She was sympathetic toward Charles, although she had no doubt of his guilt.

"Poor young gentleman, sir, it seems hard, it does, him not being quite himself at the time."

"He and Miss Margrave should have got on well together," suggested Poirot, "as the only two young people in the house."

Gladys shook her head.

"Very stand-offish Miss Lily was with him. She wouldn't have no carryings-on, and she made it plain."

"He was fond of her, was he?"

"Oh, only in passing, so to speak; no harm in it, sir. Mr. Victor Astwell, now he *is* properly gone on Miss Lily."

She giggled.

"*Ah vraiment!*"

Gladys giggled again.

"Sweet on her straight away he was. Of course, coming from Africa with all those ugly black creatures, it is no wonder he was struck. Miss Lily *is* just like a lily, isn't she, sir? So tall and such a lovely shade of gold hair."

"She should wear a green evening frock," mused Poirot. "There is a certain shade of green——"

"She has one, sir," said Gladys. "Of course, she can't wear it now, being in mourning, but she had it on the very night Sir Reuben died."

"It should be a light green, not a dark green," said Poirot.

"It is a light green, sir. If you wait a minute I'll show it to you. Miss Lily has just gone out with the dogs."

Poirot nodded. He knew that as well as Gladys did. In fact, it was only after seeing Lily safely off the premises that he had gone in search of the housemaid. Gladys hurried away, and returned a few minutes later with a green evening dress on a hanger.

"*Exquis!*" murmured Poirot, holding up hands of admiration. "Permit me to take it to the light a minute."

He took the dress from Gladys, turned his back on her and hurried to the window. He bent over it, then held it out at arm's length.

"It is perfect," he declared. "Perfectly ravishing. A thousand thanks for showing it to me."

"Not at all, sir," said Gladys. "We all know that Frenchmen are interested in ladies' dresses."

"You are too kind," murmured Poirot.

He watched her hurry away again with the dress. Then he looked down at his two hands and smiled. In the right hand was a tiny pair of nail scissors, in the left was a neatly clipped fragment of green chiffon.

"AND NOW," he murmured, "to be heroic."

He returned to his own apartment and summoned George.

"On the dressing-table, my good George, you will perceive a gold scarf pin."

"Yes, sir."

"On the washstand is a solution of carbolic. Immerse, I pray you, the point of the pin in the carbolic."

George did as he was bid. He had long ago ceased to wonder at the vagaries of his master.

"I have done that, sir."

"*Très bien!* Now approach. I tender to you my first finger; insert the point of the pin in it, if you will be so good."

"Excuse me, sir, you want me to prick you, sir?"

"But, yes, you have guessed correctly. You must draw blood, you understand, George, but not too much."

George took hold of his master's finger. Poirot shut his eyes and leaned back. The valet stabbed at the finger with the scarf pin, and Poirot uttered a shrill yell.

"*Je vous remercie*, George," he said. "What you have done is ample, ample."

Taking a small piece of green chiffon from his pocket, he dabbed his finger with it gingerly.

"The operation has succeeded to a miracle," he remarked, gazing at the result. "You have no curiosity, George? Now, that is admirable!"

The valet had just taken a discreet look out of the window.

"Excuse me, sir," he murmured, "a gentleman has driven up in a large car."

"Ah! Ah!" said Poirot. He rose briskly to his feet. "The elusive Mr. Victor Astwell. I go down to make his acquaintance."

Poirot was destined to hear Mr. Victor Astwell some time before he saw him. A loud voice rang out from the hall.

"Mind what you are doing, you damned idiot! That case has got glass in it. Curse you, Parsons, get out of the way! Put it down, you fool!"

POIROT skipped nimbly down the stairs. Victor Astwell was a big man, broad of shoulder, with a bronzed, square-cut face, not unattractive. Poirot bowed to him politely.

"Who the devil are you?" roared the big man.

Poirot bowed again.

"My name, *Monsieur*, is Hercule Poirot."

"Lord!" said Victor Astwell. "So Nancy sent for you, after all, did she? Come in here."

He put a hand on Poirot's shoulder and steered him into the library.

"So you are the fellow they make such a fuss about," he remarked, looking him up and down. "Sorry for my language just now. That chauffeur of mine is a damned ass, and Parsons always does get on my nerves, blithering old idiot."

He went over to a side table, on which was a decanter and a couple of soda-water syphons. Poirot declined his silent invitation, and he helped himself to a stiff whisky and soda.

"I don't suffer fools gladly, you know," he said, half apologetically, "but by all accounts you are not a fool, eh, M. Poirot?"

He laughed breezily.

"Those who have thought so have been sadly mistaken," said Poirot placidly.

"Is that so? Well, so Nancy has carted you down here—got a bee in her bonnet about the secretary. There is nothing in that; Trefusis is as mild as milk—drinks milk, too, I believe. The fellow is a teetotaler. Rather waste of your time, isn't it?"

"If one has an opportunity to observe human nature, time is never wasted," said Poirot quietly.

"Human nature, eh?"

VICTOR ASTWELL stared at him, then he flung himself down in a chair.

"Anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, you can tell me what your quarrel with your brother was about that evening."

Victor Astwell shook his head.

"Nothing to do with the case," he said decisively.

"One can never be sure," said Poirot.

"It had nothing to do with Charles Leverson."

"Lady Astwell thinks that Charles had nothing to do with the murder."

"Oh, Nancy!"

"Parsons assumes that it was M. Charles Leverson who came in that night, but he didn't see him. Remember nobody saw him."

"You are wrong there," said Astwell. "I saw him."

"You saw him?"

"It's very simple. Reuben had been pitching into young Charles—not without good reason, I must say. Later on he tried to bully me. I told him a few home truths and, just to annoy him, I made up my mind to back the boy. I meant to see him that night, so as to tell him how the land lay. When I went up to my room I didn't go to bed. Instead, I left the door ajar and sat on a chair smoking. My room is on the second floor, M. Poirot, and Charles' room is next to it."

"Pardon my interrupting you—Mr. Trefusis, he, too, sleeps on that floor?"

Astwell nodded.

"Yes, his room is just beyond mine."

"Nearer the stairs?"

"No; the other way."

A curious light came into Poirot's face, but the other didn't notice it and went on:

"As I say, I waited up for Charles. I heard the front door slam, as I thought, about five minutes to twelve, but there was no sign of Charles for about ten minutes. When he did come up the stairs I saw that it was no good tackling him that night."

He lifted his elbows significantly.

"I see," murmured Poirot discreetly.

"Poor devil couldn't walk straight," said Astwell. "He was looking pretty ghastly, too. I put it down to his condition at the time. Of course, now I

realize that he had come straight from committing the crime."

Poirot interposed a quick question.

"You heard nothing from the Tower room?"

Astwell shook his head.

"No, but you must remember that I was right at the other end of the building. The walls are thick, and I don't believe you would even hear a pistol shot fired from there."

Poirot nodded.

"I asked if he would like some help getting to bed," continued Astwell. "But he said he was all right and went into his room and banged the door. I undressed and went to bed and thought no more of it."

POIROT was staring thoughtfully at the carpet.

"You realize, M. Astwell," he said at last, "that your evidence is very important?"

"I suppose so, at least—what do you mean?"

"Your evidence that ten minutes elapsed between the slamming of the front door and Leverson's appearance upstairs. He himself says, so I understand, that he came into the house and went straight up to bed. But there is more than that. Lady Astwell's accusation of the secretary is fantastic, I admit, yet up to now it has not been proved impossible. But your evidence creates an *alibi*."

"How is that?"

"Lady Astwell says that she left her husband at a quarter to twelve, while the secretary had gone to bed at eleven o'clock. The only time he could have committed the crime was between a quarter to twelve and Charles Leverson's return. Now, if, as you say, you sat with your door open, he could not have come down from his room without your seeing him."

"That is so," agreed the other.

"There is no other staircase?"

"No, to get down to the Tower room he would have had to pass my door, and he didn't, I am quite sure of that. And, anyway, M. Poirot, as I said just now, the man is as meek as a parson, I assure you."

"But yes, but yes," said Poirot soothingly, "I understand all that." He paused. "And you will not tell me the subject of your quarrel with Sir Reuben?"

The other's face turned a dark red.

"You'll get nothing out of me," he growled.

Poirot looked at the ceiling.

"I can always be discreet," he murmured, "where a lady is concerned."

VICTOR ASTWELL sprang to his feet.

"Damn you, how did you—what do you mean?"

"I was thinking," said Poirot, "of Miss Lily Margrave."

Victor Astwell stood undecided for a minute or two, then his color subsided, and he sat down again.

"You are too clever for me, M. Poirot. Yes, it was Lily we quarreled about. Reuben had his knife into her; he had ferreted out something or other about the girl—false references, something of that kind. I don't believe a word of it myself.

"And then he went further than he had any right to go, talked about her stealing down at night and getting out of the house to meet some fellow or other. My God! I gave it to him, I told him that better men than he had been killed for saying less. That shut him up. Reuben was inclined to be a bit afraid of me when I got going."

"I hardly wonder at it," murmured Poirot politely.

"I think a lot of Lily Margrave," said Victor in another tone. "A nice girl through and through. I'd go bail for her anywhere."

Poirot did not answer. He was

staring in front of him, seemingly lost in abstraction. He came out of his brown study with a jerk.

"I must, I think, promenade myself a little. There is a hotel here, yes?"

"Two," said Victor Astwell, "the Golf Hotel up by the links and the Mitre down by the station."

"I thank you," said Poirot. "Yes, certainly I must promenade myself a little."

CHAPTER VI

AMAZING!

THE Golf Hotel, as befits its name, stands on the golf links almost adjoining the club house. It was to this hostelry that Poirot repaired first in the course of that "promenade" which he had advertised himself as being about to take. The little man had his own way of doing things. Three minutes after he had entered the Golf Hotel he was in private consultation with Miss Langdon, the manageress.

"I regret to incommode you in any way, *Mademoiselle*," said Poirot, "but you see I am a detective."

Simplicity always appealed to him. In this case the method proved efficacious at once.

"A detective!" exclaimed Miss Langdon, looking at him doubtfully.

"Not from Scotland Yard," Poirot assured her. "In fact—you may have noticed it? I am not an Englishman. No, I make the private inquiries into the death of Sir Reuben Astwell."

"You don't say, now!" Miss Langdon goggled at him expectantly.

"Precisely," said Poirot, beaming. Only to someone of discretion like yourself, would I reveal the fact. I think, *Mademoiselle*, you may be able to aid me. Can you tell me of any gentleman staying here on the night of the murder who was absent from the hotel that evening and returned to it about twelve or half past?"

Miss Langdon's eyes opened wider than ever.

"You don't think——?" she breathed.

"That you had the murderer here? Ah, indeed, that would be farcical! No, but I have reason to believe that a guest staying here promenaded himself in the direction of Mon Repos that night, and if so he may have seen something which, though conveying no meaning to him, might be very useful to me."

The manageress nodded her head sapiently, with an air of one thoroughly well up in the annals of detective law.

"I understand perfectly. Now, let me see; who did we have staying here just then?"

She frowned, evidently running over the names in her mind, and helping her memory by occasionally checking them off on her finger-tips.

"Captain Swann, Mr. Elkins, Major Blunt, old Mr. Benson. No, really, sir, I don't believe anyone went out that evening."

"You would have noticed if they had done so, eh?"

"Oh, yes, sir, it is not very usual, you see. I mean gentlemen go out to dinner and all that, but they don't go out after dinner, because—well, there is nowhere to go to, is there?"

The attractions of Abbots Cross were golf and nothing but golf. It did not even boast a picture house.

"That is so," agreed Poirot. "Then, as far as you remember, *Mademoiselle*, nobody from here was out that night?"

"Captain England and his wife were out to dinner."

Poirot shook his head.

"That is not the kind of thing I mean. I will try the other hotel; the Mitre, is it not?"

"Oh, the Mitre," said Miss Langdon. "Of course, anyone might have gone out walking from there."

The disparagement of her tone, though vague, was evident, and Poirot beat a tactful retreat.

TEN minutes later he was repeating the scene, this time with Miss Cole, the brusque manageress of the Mitre, a less pretentious hotel with lower prices, situated close to the station.

"There was one gentleman out late that night, came in about half-past twelve, as far as I can remember. Quite a habit of his it was, to go out for a walk at that time of the evening. He had done it once or twice before. Let me see now, what was his name? Just for the moment I can't remember it."

She pulled a large ledger toward her and began turning over the pages.

"Nineteenth, twentieth, twenty-first, twenty-second. Ah, here we are. Naylor, Captain Humphrey Naylor."

"He had stayed here before? You know him well?"

"Once before," said Miss Cole, "about a fortnight earlier. He went out then in the evening, I remember."

"He came to play golf, eh?"

"I suppose so," said Miss Cole; "that's what most of the gentlemen come for."

"Very true," said Poirot. "Well, *Mademoiselle,* I thank you infinitely, and I wish you good-day."

HE WENT back to Mon Repos with a very thoughtful face. Once or twice he drew something from his pocket and looked at it.

"It must be done," he murmured to himself, "and soon, as soon as I can make the opportunity."

His first proceeding on reentering the house was to ask Parsons where Miss Margrave might be found. He was told that she was in the small study dealing with Lady Astwell's correspondence, and the information seemed to afford Poirot satisfaction.

He found the little study without difficulty. Lily Margrave was seated at a desk by the window, writing. But for her the room was empty. Poirot carefully shut the door behind him and came toward the girl.

"I may have a little minute of your time, *Mademoiselle,* you will be so kind?"

"Certainly."

Lily Margrave put the papers aside and turned toward him.

"What can I do for you?"

"On the evening of the tragedy, *Mademoiselle,* I understand that when Lady Astwell went to her husband you went straight up to bed. Is that so?"

Lily Margrave nodded.

"You did not come down again, by any chance?"

The girl shook her head.

"I think you said, *Mademoiselle,* that you had not at any time that evening been in the Tower room?"

"I don't remember saying so, but as a matter of fact that is quite true. I was not in the Tower room that evening."

Poirot raised his eyebrows.

"Curious," he murmured.

"What do you mean?"

"Very curious," murmured Hercule Poirot again. "How do you account, then, for this?"

He drew from his pocket a little scrap of stained green chiffon and held it up for the girl's inspection.

Her expression did not change, but he felt rather than heard the sharp intake of breath.

"I don't understand, M. Poirot."

"You wore, I understand, a green chiffon dress that evening, *Mademoiselle.* This"—he tapped the scrap in his fingers—"was torn from it."

"And you found it in the Tower room?" asked the girl sharply. "Whereabouts?"

Hercule Poirot looked at the ceiling.

"For the moment shall we just say —in the Tower room?"

For the first time, a look of fear sprang into the girl's eyes. She began to speak, then checked herself. Poirot watched her small white hands clenching themselves on the edge of the desk.

"I wonder if I did go into the Tower room that evening?" she mused, "before dinner, I mean. I don't think so. I am almost sure I didn't. If that scrap has been in the Tower room all this time, it seems to me a very extraordinary thing the police did not find it."

"The police," said the little man, "do not think of the things that Hercule Poirot thinks of."

And he smiled to himself.

"I may have run in there for a minute just before dinner," mused Lily Margrave, "or it may have been the night before. I wore the same dress then. Yes, I am almost sure it was the night before."

"I think not," said Poirot evenly.

"Why?"

"He only shook his head slowly from side to side.

"What do you mean?" whispered the girl.

She was leaning forward, staring at him, all the color ebbing out of her face.

"You do not notice, *Mademoiselle*, that this fragment is stained? There is no doubt about it, that stain is human blood."

"You mean——?"

"I mean, *Mademoiselle*, that you were in the Tower room *after* the crime was committed, not before. I think you will do well to tell me the whole truth, lest worse should befall you."

He stood up now, a stern little figure of a man, his forefinger pointed accusingly at the girl.

"How did you find out?" gasped Lily.

"No matter, *Mademoiselle*. I tell you Hercule Poirot *knows*. I know all about Captain Humphrey Naylor, and that you went down to meet him that night."

LILY suddenly put her head down on her arms and burst into tears. Immediately Poirot relinquished his accusing attitude. He became almost paternal.

"There, there, my little one," he said, patting the girl on the shoulder. "Do not distress yourself. Impossible to deceive Hercule Poirot; once realize that and all your troubles will be at an end. And now you will tell me the whole story, will you not? You will tell old Papa Poirot?"

"It is not what you think, it isn't, indeed. Humphrey—my brother—never touched a hair of his head."

"Your brother, eh?" said Poirot. "So that is how the land lies. Well, if you wish to save him from suspicion, you must tell me the whole story now, without reservations, you understand?"

Lily sat up again, pushing back the hair from her forehead. After a minute or two, she began to speak in a low, clear voice.

"I will tell you the truth, M. Poirot. I can see now that it would be absurd to do anything else. My real name is Lily Naylor, and Humphrey is my only brother. Some years ago, when he was out in Africa, he discovered a gold mine, or rather, I should say, discovered the presence of gold. I can't tell you this part of it properly, because I don't understand the technical details, but what it amounted to was this:

"The thing seemed likely to be a very big undertaking, and Humphrey came home with letters to Sir Reuben Astwell in the hopes of getting him interested in the matter. I don't understand the rights of it even now, but I gather that Sir Reuben sent out

an expert to report, and that he subsequently told my brother that the expert's report was unfavorable and that he, Humphrey, had made a great mistake. My brother went back to Africa on an expedition into the interior and was lost sight of. It was assumed that he and the expedition had perished.

"It was soon after that that a company was formed to exploit the Mpala Gold Fields. When my brother got back to England he at once jumped to the conclusion that these gold fields were identical with those he had discovered. Sir Reuben Astwell had apparently nothing to do with this company, and they had seemingly discovered the place on their own. But my brother was not satisfied; he was convinced that Sir Reuben had deliberately swindled him.

"He became more and more violent and unhappy about the matter. We two are alone in the world, M. Poirot, and as it was necessary then for me to go out and earn my own living, I conceived the idea of taking a post in this household and trying to find out if any connection existed between Sir Reuben and the Mpala Gold Fields. For obvious reasons I concealed my real name, and I'll admit frankly that I used a forged reference.

"There were many applicants for the post, most of them with better qualifications than mine, so—well, M. Poirot, I wrote a beautiful letter from the Duchess of Perthshire, who I knew had just gone to America. I thought a Duchess would have a great effect upon Lady Astwell, and I was quite right. She engaged me on the spot.

"Since then I have been that hateful thing, a spy, and until lately with no success. Sir Reuben is not a man to give away his business secrets, but when Victor Astwell came back from Africa he was less guarded in his talk, and I began to believe that, after all, Humphrey had not been mistaken. My brother came down here about a fortnight before the murder, and I crept out of the house to meet him secretly at night. I told him the things Victor Astwell had said, and he became very excited and assured me I was on the right track.

"But after that things began to go wrong; someone must have seen me stealing out of the house and have reported the matter to Sir Reuben. He became suspicious and hunted up my references, and soon discovered the fact that they were forged. The crisis came on the day of the murder. I think he thought I was after his wife's jewels. Whatever his suspicions were, he had no intention to allow me to remain any longer at Mon Repos, though he agreed not to prosecute me on account of the references. Lady Astwell took my part throughout and stood up valiantly to Sir Reuben."

She paused. Poirot's face was very grave.

"And now, *Mademoiselle*," he said, "we come to the night of the murder."

LILY swallowed hard and nodded her head.

"To begin with, M. Poirot, I must tell you that my brother had come down again, and that I had arranged to creep out and meet him once more. I went up to my room, as I have said, but I did not go to bed. Instead, I waited till I thought everyone was asleep, and then stole downstairs again and out by the side door. I met Humphrey and acquainted him in a few hurried words with what had occurred. I told him that I believed the papers he wanted were in Sir Reuben's safe in the Tower room, and we agreed as a last desperate adventure to try and get hold of them that night.

"I was to go in first and see that

the way was clear. I heard the church clock strike twelve as I went in by the side door. I was halfway up the stairs leading to the Tower room, when I heard a thud of something falling, and a voice cried out, 'My God!' A minute or two afterward the door of the Tower room opened, and Charles Leverson came out. I could see his face quite clearly in the moonlight, but I was crouching some way below him on the stairs where it was dark, and he did not see me.

"He stood there a moment swaying on his feet and looking ghastly. He seemed to be listening; then with an effort he seemed to pull himself together and, opening the door into the Tower room, called out something about there being no harm done. His voice was quite jaunty and debonair, but his face gave the lie to it. He waited a minute more, and then slowly went on upstairs and out of sight.

"When he had gone I waited a minute or two and then crept to the Tower room door. I had a feeling that something tragic had happened. The main light was out, but the desk lamp was on, and by its light I saw Sir Reuben lying in a huddled mass on the floor by the desk. I don't know how I managed it, but I nerved myself at last to go over and kneel down by him. I saw at once that he was dead, struck down from behind, and also that he couldn't have been dead long; I touched his hand and it was still quite warm. It was horrible, M. Poirot. Horrible!"

She shuddered again at the remembrance.

"And then?" said Poirot, looking at her keenly.

Lily Margrave nodded.

"Yes, M. Poirot, I know what you are thinking. Why didn't I give the alarm and raise the house? I should have done so—I know, but it came over me in a flash, as I knelt there, that my quarrel with Sir Reuben, my stealing out to meet Humphrey, the fact that I was being sent away on the morrow, made a fatal sequence. They would say that I had let Humphrey in, and that Humphrey had killed Sir Reuben out of revenge. If I said that I had seen Charles Leverson leaving the room, no one would believe me.

"It was terrible, M. Poirot! I knelt there, and thought and thought, and the more I thought the more my nerve failed me. Presently I noticed Sir Reuben's keys which had dropped from his pocket as he fell. Among them was the key of the safe, the combination word I already knew, since Lady Astwell had mentioned it once in my hearing. I went over to that safe, M. Poirot, unlocked it and rummaged through the papers.

"In the end I found what I was looking for. Humphrey had been perfectly right. Sir Reuben was behind the Mpala Gold Fields, and he had deliberately s w i n d l e d Humphrey. That made it all the worse. It gave a perfectly definite motive for Humphrey having committed the crime. I put the papers back in the safe, left the key in the door of it, and went straight upstairs to my room. In the morning I pretended to be surprised and horror-stricken, like everyone else, when the housemaid discovered the body."

She stopped and looked piteously across at Poirot.

"You do believe me, M. Poirot. Oh, do say you believe me!"

"I believe you, *Mademoiselle*," said Poirot; "you have explained many things that puzzled me. Your absolute certainty, for one thing, that Charles Leverson had committed the crime, and at the same time your persistent efforts to keep me from coming down here."

Lily nodded.

"I was afraid of you," she admitted frankly. "Lady Astwell could not know, as I did, that Charles was guilty, and I couldn't say anything. I hoped against hope that you would refuse to take the case."

"But for that obvious anxiety on your part, I might have done so," said Poirot dryly.

Lily looked at him swiftly, her lips trembled a little.

"And now, M. Poirot, what—what are you going to do?"

"As far as you are concerned, *Mademoiselle*, nothing. I believe your story, and I accept it. The next step is to go to London and see Inspector Miller."

"And then?" asked Lily.

"And then," said Poirot, "we shall see."

Outside the door of the study, he looked once more at the little square of stained green chiffon in his hand.

"Amazing," he murmured to himself complacently, "the ingenuity of Hercule Poirot.

CHAPTER VII

A GOOD STORY, ANYWAY

DETECTIVE INSPECTOR MILLER was not particularly fond of M. Hercule Poirot. He did not belong to that small band of inspectors at the Yard who welcomed the little Belgian's co-operation. He was wont to say that Hercule Poirot was much over-rated. In this case he felt pretty sure of himself, and greeted Poirot with high good humor in consequence.

"Acting for Lady Astwell, are you? Well, you have taken up a mare's nest in that case."

"There is, then, no possible doubt about the matter?"

Miller winked.

"Never was a clearer case, short of catching a murderer absolutely red-handed."

"M. Leverson has made a statement, I understand?"

"He had better have kept his mouth shut," said the detective. "He repeats over and over again that he went straight up to his room and never went near his uncle. That's a fool story on the face of it."

"It is certainly against the weight of evidence," murmured Poirot. "How does he strike you, this young M. Leverson?"

"Darned young fool."

"A weak character, eh?"

The inspector nodded.

"One would hardly think a young man of that type would have the—how do you say it—the bowels to commit such a crime."

"On the face of it, no," agreed the inspector. "But, bless you, I have come across the same thing many times. Get a weak, dissipated young man into a corner, fill him up with a drop too much to drink, and for a limited amount of time you can turn him into a fire eater. A weak man in a corner is more dangerous than a strong man."

"That is true, yes; that is true what you say."

Miller unbent a little further.

"Of course, it is all right for you, M. Poirot," he said. "You get your fees just the same, and naturally you have to make a pretence of examining the evidence to satisfy her Ladyship. I can understand all that."

"You understand such interesting things," murmured Poirot, and took his leave.

HIS next call was upon the solicitor representing Charles Leverson. Mr. Mayhew was a thin, dry, cautious gentleman. He received Poirot with reserve. Poirot, however, had his own ways of inducing confidence. In

ten minutes' time the two were talking together amicably.

"You will understand," said Poirot, "I am acting in this case solely on behalf of Mr. Leverson. That is Lady Astwell's wish. She is convinced that he is not guilty."

"Yes, yes, quite so," said Mr. Mayhew without enthusiasm.

Poirot's eyes twinkled.

"You do not perhaps attach much importance to the opinions of Lady Astwell?" he suggested.

"She might be just as sure of his guilt tomorrow," said the lawyer dryly.

"Her intuitions are not evidence certainly," agreed Poirot, "and on the face of it the case looks very black against this poor young man."

"It is a pity he said what he did to the police," said the lawyer, "it will be no good his sticking to that story."

"Has he stuck to it to you?" inquired Poirot.

Mayhew nodded.

"It never varies an iota. He repeats it like a parrot."

"And that is what destroys your faith in him," mused the other. "Ah, don't deny it," he added quickly, holding up an arresting hand, "I see it only too plainly. In your heart you believe him guilty. But listen now to me, to me, Hercule Poirot. I present to you a case.

"This young man comes home, he has drunk the cocktail, the cocktail, and again the cocktail, also without doubt the English whisky and soda many times. He is full of, what you call it? the courage Dutch, and in that mood he lets himself into the house with his latch key, and he goes with unsteady steps up to the Tower room. He looks in at the door and sees in the dim light his uncle, apparently bending over the desk.

"M. Leverson is full, as we have said, of the courage Dutch. He lets himself go, he tells his uncle just what he thinks of him. He defies him, he insults him, and the more his uncle does not answer back, the more he is encouraged to go on, to repeat himself, to say the same thing over and over again, and each time more loudly. But at last the continued silence of his uncle awakens an apprehension. He goes nearer to him, he lays his hand on his uncle's shoulder, and his uncle's figure crumples under his touch and sinks in a heap to the ground.

"He is sobered then, this M. Leverson. The chair falls with a crash, and he bends over Sir Reuben. He realizes what has happened, he looks at his hand covered with something warm and red. He is in a panic then, he would give anything on earth to recall the cry which has just sprung from his lips, echoing through the house. Mechanically he picks up the chair, then he hastens out through the door and listens. He fancies he hears a sound, and immediately, automatically, he pretends to be speaking to his uncle through the open door.

"The sound is not repeated. He is convinced he has been mistaken in thinking he heard one. Now all is silence, he creeps up to his room, and at once it occurs to him how much better it will be if he pretends never to have been near his uncle that night. So he tells his story. Parsons at that time, remember, has said nothing of what he heard. When he does do so, it is too late for M. Leverson to change. He is stupid, and he is obstinate, he sticks to his story. Tell me, *Monsieur*, is that not possible?"

"Yes," said the lawyer, "I suppose in the way you put it, that it is possible."

Poirot rose to his feet.

"You have the privilege of seeing M. Leverson," he said. "Put to him

the story I have told you, and ask him if it is not true."

Outside the lawyer's office, Poirot hailed a taxi.

"348 Harley Street," he murmured to the driver.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BULGE IN THE CURTAIN

POIROT'S departure for London had taken Lady Astwell by surprise, for the little man had not made any mention of what he proposed doing. On his return, after an absence of twenty-four hours, he was informed by Parsons that Lady Astwell would like to see him as soon as possible. Poirot found the lady in her own boudoir. She was lying down on the divan, her head propped up by cushions, and she looked startlingly ill and haggared; far more so than she had done on the day Poirot arrived.

"So you have come back, M. Poirot?"

"I have returned, milady."

"You went to London?"

Poirot nodded.

"You didn't tell me you were going," said Lady Astwell sharply.

"A thousand apologies, milady, I am in error, I should have done so. *La prochaine fois*——"

"You will do exactly the same," interrupted Lady Astwell with a shrewd touch of humor. "Do things first and tell people afterward, that is your motto right enough."

"Perhaps it has also been milady's motto?" his eyes twinkled.

"Now and then, perhaps," admitted the other. "What did you go up to London for, M. Poirot. You can tell me now, I suppose?"

"I had an interview with the good Inspector Miller, and also with the excellent Mr. Mayhew."

Lady Astwell's eyes searched his face.

"And you think, now——?" she said slowly.

Poirot's eyes were fixed on her steadily.

"That there is a possibility of Charles Leverson's innocence," he said gravely.

"Ah!" Lady Astwell half sprang up, sending two cushions rolling to the ground. "I was right, then, I was right!"

"I said a possibility, Madame, that is all."

SOMETHING in his tone seemed to strike her. She raised herself on one elbow and regarded him piercingly.

"Can I do anything?" she asked.

"Yes," he nodded his head, "you can tell me, Lady Astwell, why you suspect Owen Trefusis."

"I have told you I *know*—that's all."

"Unfortunately that is not enough," said Poirot dryly. "Cast your mind back to the fatal evening, milady. Remember each detail, each tiny happening, what did you notice or observe about the secretary? I, Hercule Poirot, tell you there must have been something."

Lady Astwell shook her head.

"I hardly noticed him at all that evening," she said, "and I certainly was not thinking of him."

"Your mind was taken up by something else?"

"Yes."

"With your husband's animus against Miss Lily Margrave?"

"That's right," said Lady Astwell, nodding her head, "you seem to know all about it, M. Poirot."

"Me, I know everything," declared the little man with an absurdly grandiose air.

"I am fond of Lily, M. Poirot, you have seen that for yourself. Reuben began kicking up a rumpus

about some reference or other of hers. Mind you, I don't say she hadn't cheated about it. She had. But, bless you, I have done many worse things than that in the old days. You have got to be up to all sorts of tricks to get round theatrical managers. There is nothing I wouldn't have written, or said, or done, in my time.

"Lily wanted this job, and she put in a lot of slick work that was not quite—well, quite the thing, you know. Men are so stupid about that sort of thing; Lily really might have been a bank clerk absconding with millions for the fuss he made about it. I was terribly worried all the evening, because, although I could usually get round Reuben in the end, he was terribly pig-headed at times, poor darling. So of course I hadn't time to go noticing secretaries, not that one does notice Mr. Trefusis much, anyway. He is just there and that's all there is to it."

"I have noticed that fact about M. Trefusis," said Poirot. "His is not a personality that stands forth, that shines, that hits you cr-r-rack."

"No," said Lady Astwell, "he is not like Victor."

"M. Victor Astwell is, I should say, explosive."

"That is a splendid word for him," said Lady Astwell. "He explodes all over the house, like one of those thingimy-jig firework things."

"A somewhat quick temper, I should imagine?" suggested Poirot.

"Oh, he's a perfect devil when roused," said Lady Astwell, "but bless you, *I'm* not afraid of him. All bark and no bite to Victor."

Poirot looked at the ceiling.

"And you can tell me nothing about the secretary that evening?" he murmured gently.

"I tell you, M. Poirot, I *know*. It's intuition. A woman's intuition——"

"Will not hang a man," said Poirot, "and what is more to the point, it will not save a man from being hanged. Lady Astwell, if you sincerely believe that M. Leverson is innocent, and that your suspicions of the secretary are well-founded, will you consent to a little experiment?"

"What kind of an experiment?" demanded Lady Astwell suspiciously.

"Will you permit yourself to be put into a condition of hypnosis?"

"Whatever for?"

POIROT leaned forward.

"If I were to tell you, Madame, that your intuition is based on certain facts recorded subconsciously, you would probably be skeptical. I will only say, then, that this experiment I propose may be of great importance to that unfortunate young man, Charles Leverson. You will not refuse?"

"Who is going to put me into a trance?" demanded Lady Astwell suspiciously. "You?"

"A friend of mine, Lady Astwell, arrives, if I mistake not, at this very minute. I hear the wheels of the car outside."

"Who is he?"

"A Doctor Cazalet of Harley Street."

"Is he—all right?" asked Lady Astwell apprehensively.

"He is not a quack, Madame, if that is what you mean. You can trust yourself in his hands quite safely."

"Well," said Lady Astwell with a sigh, "I think it is all bunkum, but you can try if you like. Nobody is going to say that I stood in your way."

"A thousand thanks, milady."

POIROT hurried from the room. In a few minutes he returned ushering in a cheerful, round-faced little

man, with spectacles, who was very upsetting to Lady Astwell's conception of what a hypnotist should look like. Poirot introduced them.

"Well," said Lady Astwell good-humoredly, "how do we start this tomfoolery?"

"Quite simple, Lady Astwell, quite simple," said the little doctor. "Just lean back, so—that's right, that's right. No need to be uneasy."

"I am not in the least uneasy," said Lady Astwell. "I should like to see anyone hypnotizing me against my will."

Doctor Cazalet smiled broadly.

"Yes, but if you consent, it won't be against your will, will it?" he said cheerfully. "That's right. Turn off that other light, will you, M. Poirot? Just let yourself go to sleep, Lady Astwell."

He shifted his position a little.

"It's getting late! You are sleepy—very sleepy. Your eyelids are heavy, they are closing—closing—closing. Soon you will be asleep. . . ."

His voice droned on, low, soothing and monotonous. Presently he leaned forward and gently lifted Lady Astwell's right eyelid. Then he turned to Poirot, nodding in a satisfied manner.

"That's all right," he said in a low voice. "Shall I go ahead?"

"If you please."

The doctor spoke out sharply and authoritatively:

"You are asleep, Lady Astwell, but you hear me, and you can answer my questions."

Without stirring or raising an eyelid, the motionless figure on the sofa replied in a low, monotonous voice:

"I hear you. I can answer your questions."

"Lady Astwell, I want you to go back to the evening on which your husband was murdered. You remember that evening?"

"Yes."

"You are at the dinner-table. Describe to me what you saw and felt."

The prone figure stirred a little restlessly.

"I am in great distress. I am worried about Lily."

"We know that; tell us what you saw."

"Victor is eating all the salted almonds; he is greedy. Tomorrow I shall tell Parsons not to put the dish that side of the table."

"Go on, Lady Astwell."

"Reuben is in a bad humor tonight. I don't think it is altogether about Lily. It is something to do with business. Victor looks at him in a queer way."

"Tell us about Mr. Trefusis, Lady Astwell."

"His left shirt cuff is frayed. He puts a lot of grease on his hair. I wish men didn't, it ruins the covers in the drawing-room."

CAZALET looked at Poirot; the other made a motion with his head.

"It is after dinner, Lady Astwell, you are having coffee. Describe the scene to me."

"The coffee is good tonight. It varies. Cook is very unreliable over her coffee. Lily keeps looking out of the window, I don't know why. Now, Reuben comes into the room; he is in one of his worst moods tonight, and bursts out with a perfect flood of abuse to poor Mr. Trefusis. Mr. Trefusis has his hand round the paper-knife, the big one with the sharp blade like a knife. How hard he is grasping it; his knuckles are quite white. Look, he has dug it so hard in the table that the point snaps. He holds it just as you would hold a dagger you were going to stick into someone. There, they have gone out together now. Lily has got her green evening-dress on; she looks so pretty in green, just like a lily. I

must have the covers cleaned next week."

"Just a minute, Lady Astwell."

The doctor leaned across to Poirot.

"We have got it, I think," he murmured, "that action with the paper-knife, that's what convinced her that the secretary did the thing."

"Let us go on to the Tower room now."

The doctor nodded, and began once more to question Lady Astwell in his high, decisive voice.

"It is later in the evening, you are in the Tower room with your husband. You and he have had a terrible scene together, have you not?"

Again the figure stirred uneasily.

"Yes—terrible—terrible. We said dreadful things—both of us."

"Never mind that now. You can see the room clearly, the curtains were drawn, the lights were on."

"Not the middle light, only the desk-light."

"You are leaving your husband now, you are saying good-night to him."

"No, I was too angry."

"It is the last time you will see him; very soon he will be murdered. Do you know who murdered him, Lady Astwell?"

"Yes, Mr. Trefusis."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because of the bulge—the bulge in the curtain."

"There was a bulge in the curtain?"

"Yes."

"You saw it?"

"Yes. I almost touched it."

"Was there a man concealed there—Mr. Trefusis?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

For the first time the monotonous answering voice hesitated and lost confidence.

"I—I—because of the paper-knife."

Poirot and the doctor again interchanged swift glances.

"I don't understand you, Lady Astwell. There was a bulge in the curtain, you say? Someone concealed there? You didn't see that person?"

"No."

"You thought it was Mr. Trefusis because of the way he held the paper-knife earlier?"

"Yes."

"But Mr. Trefusis had gone upstairs, had he not?"

"Yes—yes, that's right, he had gone upstairs."

"So he couldn't have been behind the curtain in the window."

"No—no, of course not, he wasn't there."

"He had said good-night to your husband some time before, hadn't he?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't see him again?"

"No."

SHE was stirring now, throwing herself about, moaning faintly.

"She is coming out," said the doctor. "Well, I think we have got all we can, eh?"

Poirot nodded. The doctor leaned over Lady Astwell.

"You are waking," he murmured softly. "You are waking now. In another minute you will open your eyes."

The two men waited, and presently Lady Astwell suddenly sat upright and stared at them both.

"Have I been having a nap?"

"That's it, Lady Astwell, just a little sleep," said the doctor.

She looked at him.

"Some of your hocus pocus, eh?"

"You don't feel any the worse, I hope?" he asked.

Lady Astwell yawned.

"I feel rather tired and done up."

The doctor rose.

"I will ask them to send you up some coffee," he said, "and we will leave you for the present."

"Did I—say anything?" Lady Astwell called after them as they reached the door.

Poirot smiled back at her.

"Nothing of great importance, Madame. You informed us that the drawing-room covers needed cleaning."

"So they do," said Lady Astwell. "You needn't have put me into a trance to get me to tell you that." She laughed good-humoredly. "Anything more?"

"Do you remember M. Trefusis picking up a paper-knife in the drawing-room that night?" asked Poirot.

"I don't know, I'm sure," said Lady Astwell. "He may have done so."

"Does a bulge in the curtain convey anything to you?"

Lady Astwell frowned.

"I seem to remember," she said slowly. "No—it's gone, and yet——"

"Do not distress yourself, Lady Astwell," said Poirot quickly, "it is of no importance—of no importance whatever."

THE doctor went with Poirot to the latter's room.

"Well," said Cazalet, "I think this explains things pretty clearly. No doubt when Sir Reuben was dressing down the secretary, the latter grabbed tight hold on a paper-knife, and had to exercise a good deal of self-control to prevent himself answering back. Lady Astwell's conscious mind was wholly taken up with the problem of Lily Margrave, but her subconscious mind noticed, and misconstrued the action.

"It implanted in her the firm conviction that Trefusis murdered Sir Reuben. Now we come to the bulge in the curtain. That is interesting. I take it from what you have told me of the Tower room that the desk was right in the window. There are curtains across that window, of course?"

"Yes, *mon ami*, black velvet curtains."

"And there is room in the embrasure of the window for anyone to remain concealed behind them?"

"There would be just room, I think."

"Then there seems at least a possibility," said the doctor slowly, "that someone was concealed in the room, but if so it could not be the secretary, since they both saw him leave the room. It could not be Victor Astwell, for Trefusis met him going out, and it could not be Lily Margrave. Whoever it was must have been concealed there before Sir Reuben entered the room that evening. You have told me pretty well how the land lies. Now what about Captain Naylor? Could it have been he who was concealed there?"

"It is always possible," admitted Poirot. "He certainly dined at the hotel, but how soon he went out afterward is difficult to fix exactly. He returned about half past twelve."

"Then it might have been he," said the doctor, "and if so, he committed the crime. He had the motive, and there was a weapon near at hand. You don't seem satisfied with the idea, though?"

"Me, I have other ideas," confessed Poirot. "Tell me now, *M. le Docteur*, supposing for one minute that Lady Astwell herself had committed this crime, would she necessarily betray the fact in the hypnotic state?"

The doctor whistled.

"So that's what you are getting at? Lady Astwell is the criminal, eh? Of course—it is possible, I never thought of it till this minute. She was the last to be with him, and

no one saw him alive afterward. As to your question, I should be inclined to say—No. Lady Astwell would go into the hypnotic state with a strong mental reservation to say nothing of her own part in the crime. She would answer my questions truthfully, but she would be dumb on that one point. Yet I should hardly have expected her to be so insistent on Mr. Trefusis's guilt."

"I comprehend," said Poirot. "But I have not said that I believe Lady Astwell to be the criminal. It is a suggestion, that is all."

"It is an interesting case," said the doctor after a minute or two. "Granting Charles Leverson is innocent, there are so many possibilities, Humphrey Naylor, Lady Astwell and even Lily Margrave."

"There is another you have not mentioned," said Poirot quietly, "Victor Astwell. According to his own story, he sat in his room with the door open waiting for Charles Leverson's return, but we have only his own word for it, you comprehend?"

"He is the bad-tempered fellow, isn't he?" asked the doctor. "The one you told me about?"

"That is so," agreed Poirot.

The doctor rose to his feet.

"Well, I must be getting back to town, ought to do it in three-quarters of an hour at this time of night. You will let me know how things shape, won't you?"

AFTER the doctor had left, Poirot pulled the bell for George.

"A cup of *tisane*, George. My nerves are much disturbed."

"Certainly, sir," said George. "I will prepare it immediately."

Ten minutes later he brought a steaming cup to his master. Poirot inhaled the noxious fumes with pleasure. As he sipped it, he soliloquized aloud.

"The chase is different all over the world. To catch the fox you ride hard with the dogs. You shout, you run, it is a matter of speed. I have not shot the stag myself, but I understand that to do so you crawl for many long, long hours upon your stomach. My friend Hastings has recounted the affair to me. Our method here, my good George, must be neither of these. Let us reflect upon the household cat. For many long, weary hours, he watches the mouse hole, he makes no movement, he betrays no energy, but he—does not go away."

He sighed and put the empty cup down on its saucer.

"I told you to pack for a few days. Tomorrow, my good George, you will go to London and bring down what is necessary for a fortnight."

"Very good, sir," said George. As usual he displayed no emotion.

CHAPTER IX

THE CAT

THE apparently permanent presence of Hercule Poirot at Mon Repos, was disquieting to many people. Victor Astwell remonstrated with his sister-in-law about it.

"It's all very well, Nancy. You don't know what fellows of that kind are like. He has found jolly comfortable quarters here, and he is evidently going to settle down comfortably for about a month, charging you two guineas a day all the while, I suppose."

Lady Astwell's reply was to the effect that she could manage her own affairs without outside interference.

Lily Margrave tried earnestly to conceal her perturbation. At the time, she had felt sure that Poirot believed her story. Now she was not so certain.

Poirot did not play an entirely quiescent game. On the fifth day of his sojourn, he brought down a small thumbograph album to dinner. As a method of getting the thumb-prints of the household, it seemed a rather clumsy device, yet not perhaps so clumsy as it seemed, since no one could afford to refuse their thumb-prints. Only after the little man had retired to bed did Victor Astwell state his views.

"You see what it means, Nancy. He is out after one of us."

"Don't be absurd, Victor."

"Well, what other meaning could that blinking little book of his have?"

"M. Poirot knows what he is doing," said Lady Astwell complacently, and looked with some meaning at Owen Trefusis.

On another occasion, Poirot introduced the game of tracing foot-prints on a sheet of paper. The following morning, going with his soft cat-like tread into the library, the detective startled Owen Trefusis, who leaped from his chair as though he had been shot.

"You must really excuse me, M. Poirot," he said primly, "but you have us on the jump."

"Indeed, how is that?" demanded the little man innocently.

"I will admit," said the secretary, "that I thought the case against Charles Leverson utterly overwhelming. You apparently do not find it so."

POIROT was standing looking out of the window. He turned suddenly to the other.

"I shall tell you something, M. Trefusis—in confidence."

"Yes?"

Poirot seemed in no hurry to begin. He waited a minute, hesitating. When he did speak, his opening words were coincident with the opening and shutting of the front door. For a man saying something in confidence, he spoke rather loudly, his voice drowning the sound of a foot-step in the hall outside.

"I shall tell you this in confidence, Mr. Trefusis. There is new evidence. It goes to prove that when Charles Leverson entered the Tower room that night, Sir Reuben was already dead."

The secretary stared at him in amazement.

"But what evidence? Why have we not heard of it?"

"You *will* hear," said the little man mysteriously. "In the meantime, you and I alone know the secret."

He skipped nimbly out of the room, and almost collided with Victor Astwell in the hall outside.

"You have just come in, eh, *Monsieur?*"

Astwell nodded.

"Beastly day outside," he said, breathing hard, "cold and blowy."

"Ah," said Piorot, "I shall not promenade myself today—me, I am like a cat, I sit by the fire and keep myself warm."

"*Ca marche*, George," he said that evening to the faithful valet, rubbing his hands as he spoke, "they are on the tenter-hooks—the jump! It is hard, George, to play the game of the cat, the waiting game, but it answers, yes, it answers wonderfully. Tomorrow we make a little further effect."

ON THE following day, Trefusis was obliged to go up to town. He went up by the same train as Victor Astwell. No sooner had they left the house than Poirot was galvanized into a fever of activity.

"Come, George, let us hurry to work. If the housemaid should approach these rooms, you must delay her. Speak to her sweet nothings,

George, and keep her in the corridor."

He went first to the secretary's room, and began a thorough search. Not a drawer or a shelf was left uninspected. Then he replaced everything hurriedly, and declared his quest finished. George, on guard in the doorway, gave way to a deferential cough.

"If you will excuse me, sir?"

"Yes, my good George?"

"The shoes, sir. The two pairs of brown shoes were on the second shelf, and the patent-leather ones were on the shelf underneath. In replacing them you have reversed the order."

"Marvelous!" cried Poirot, holding up his hands. "But let us not distress ourselves over that. It is of no importance, I assure you, George. Never will M. Trefusis notice such a trifling matter."

"As you think, sir," said George.

"It is your business to notice such things," said Poirot encouragingly as he clapped the other on the shoulder. "It reflects credit upon you, great credit."

The valet did not reply, and when, later in the day, the proceeding was repeated in the room of Victor Astwell, he made no comment on the fact that Mr. Astwell's undercloth-ing was not returned to its drawers strictly according to plan. Yet, in the second case at least, events proved the valet to be right and Poirot wrong. Victor Astwell came storming into the drawing-room that evening.

"Now, look here, you damned little Belgian jackanapes, what do you mean by searching my room? What the devil do you think you are going to find there? I won't have it do you hear? That's what comes of having a nasty, ferreting little spy in the house."

Poirot's hands spread themselves out eloquently as his words tumbled one over the other. He demanded a hundred apologies, a thousand, a million. He had been maladroit, officious, he was confused. He had taken an unwarranted liberty. In the end the infuriated gentleman was forced to subside, still growling inarticulately to himself.

And again that evening, sipping his *tisane,* Poirot murumred to George:

"It marches, my good George, yes —it marches."

CHAPTER X

THE UNDER DOG

"FRIDAY," observed Hercule Poirot thoughtfully, "is my lucky day."

"Indeed, sir."

"You are not superstitious, perhaps, my good George?"

"I prefer not to sit down thirteen at table, sir, and I am adverse to passing under ladders. I have no superstitions about a Friday, sir."

"That is well," said Poirot, "for, see you, today we make our Waterloo."

"Really, sir."

"You have such enthusiasm, my good George, you do not even ask what I propose to do."

"And what is that, sir?"

Poirot leaned forward, shaking an emphatic forefinger.

"Today, George, I make a final thorough search of the Tower room."

TRUE enough, after breakfast, Poirot, with the permission of Lady Astwell, repaired to the scene of the crime. There, at various times of the morning, members of the household saw him crawling about on all fours, examining minutely the black velvet curtains and standing on high chairs to examine the picture frames

on the wall. Lady Astwell for the first time displayed uneasiness.

"I have to admit," she said. "He is getting on my nerves at last. He has something up his sleeve, and I don't know what it is. And the way he is crawling about on the floor up there like a dog makes me downright shivery. What is he looking for, I'd like to know? Lily, my dear, I wish you would go up and see what he is up to now. No, on the whole, I'd rather you stayed with me."

"Shall I go, Lady Astwell?" asked the secretary, rising from the desk, by the window.

"If you would, Mr. Trefusis."

Owen Trefusis left the room and mounted the stairs to the Tower room. At first glance, he thought the room was empty, there was certainly no sign of Hercule Poirot there. He was just turning to go down again, when a sound caught his ears; he then saw the little man halfway down the spiral staircase that led to the bedroom above.

He was on his hands and knees, in his left hand was a little pocket lens, and through this he was examining minutely something on the woodwork beside the stair carpet.

As the secretary watched him, he uttered a sudden grunt, and slipped the lens into his pocket. He then rose to his feet, holding something between his finger and thumb. At that moment he became aware of the secretary's presence.

"Ah, hah! M. Trefusis, I didn't hear you enter."

He was in that moment a different man. Triumph and exultation beamed all over his face. Trefusis stared at him in surprise.

"What is the matter, M. Poirot? You look very pleased with yourself."

The little man puffed out his chest importantly.

"Yes, indeed. See you I have at last found that which I have been looking for from the beginning. I have here between my finger and thumb the one thing necessary to convict the criminal."

"Then," the secretary raised his eyebrows, "it was not Charles Leverson?"

"It was not Charles Leverson," said Poirot. "Until this moment, though I know the criminal, I am not sure of his name, but at last all is clear."

He stepped down the stairs and tapped the secretary on the shoulder.

"I am obliged to go to London immediately. Speak to Lady Astwell for me. Will you request her that everyone should be assembled in the Tower room this evening at nine o'clock? I shall be there then, and I shall reveal the truth. Ah, me, but I am well content."

And, breaking into a fantastic little dance, he skipped from the Tower room. Trefusis was left staring after him.

A FEW minutes later, Poirot appeared in the library, demanding if anyone could supply him with a little cardboard-box.

"Unfortunately, I have not such a thing with me," he explained, "and there is something of great value that it is necessary for me to put inside."

From one of the drawers in the desk, Trefusis produced a small box, and Poirot professed himself highly delighted with it.

"Just what I need," he declared.

He hurried upstairs with his treasure-trove; meeting George on the landing, he handed the box to him.

"There is something of great importance inside," he explained.

"Place it, my good George, in the second drawer of my dressing-table, beside the jewel-case that contains my pearl studs."

"Very good, sir," said George.

"Do not break it," said Poirot. "Be very careful. Inside that box is something that will hang a criminal."

"You don't say, sir," said George.

Poirot hurried down the stairs again and, seizing his hat, departed from the house at a brisk run.

HIS return was more unostentatious. The faithful George, according to orders, admitted him by the side door.

"They are all in the Tower room?" inquired Poirot.

"Yes, sir."

There was a murmured interchange of a few words, and then Poirot mounted with the triumphant step of the victor to that room where the murder had taken place less than a month ago. His eyes swept around the room. They were all there, Lady Astwell, Victor Astwell, Lily Margrave, the secretary, and Parsons, the butler. The latter was hovering by the door uncertainly.

"George, sir, said I should be needed here," said Parsons as Poirot made his appearance. "I don't know if that is right, sir?"

"Quite right," said Poirot. "Remain, I pray of you."

He advanced to the middle of the room.

"This has been a case of great interest," he said in a slow, reflective voice. "It is interesting because anyone might have murdered Sir Reuben Astwell. Who inherits his money? Charles Leverson and Lady Astwell. Who was with him last that night? Lady Astwell. Who q u a r r e l e d with him violently? Again Lady Astwell."

"What are you talking about?" cried Lady Astwell. "I don't understand, I——"

"But someone else quarreled with Sir Reuben," continued Poirot in a pensive voice. "Someone else left him that night white with rage. Supposing that Lady Astwell left her husband alive at a quarter to twelve that night, there would be ten minutes before Mr. Charles Leverson returned, ten minutes in which it would be possible for someone from the second floor to steal down and do the deed, and then return to his room again."

Victor Astwell sprang up with a cry.

"What the hell——?" he stopped, choking with rage.

"In a rage, Mr. Astwell, you once killed a man in West Africa."

"I don't believe it," cried Lily Margrave.

She came forward, her hands clenched, two bright spots of color in her cheeks. Poirot gave her a swift glance.

"I don't believe it," repeated the girl.

She came close to Victor Astwell's side.

"It's true, Lily," said Astwell, "but there are things this man doesn't know. The fellow I killed was a witch doctor who had just massacred fifteen children. I consider that I was justified."

Lily came up to Poirot.

"M. Poirot," she said earnestly, "you are wrong. Because a man has a sharp temper, because he breaks out and says all kinds of things, that is not any reason why he should do a murder. I know—I *know*, I tell you, that Mr. Astwell is incapable of such a thing."

Poirot looked at her, a very curious smile on his face. Then he took her hand in his and patted it gently.

"You see, *Mademoiselle*," he said gently, "you also have your intui-

tions. So you believe in Mr. Astwell, do you?"

Lily spoke quietly, albeit with a little break in her voice.

"Mr. Astwell is a good man," she said, "and he is honest. He had nothing to do with the inside work of the Mpala Gold Fields. He is good through and through, and—I have promised to marry him."

Victor Astwell came to her side and took her other hand. He was quite quiet now.

"Before God, M. Poirot," he said, "I didn't kill my brother."

"I know you did not," said Poirot.

His eyes swept around the room.

"Listen, my friends. In an hypnotic trance, Lady Astwell mentioned having seen a bulge in the curtain that night."

Everyone's eyes swept to the window.

"You mean there was a burglar concealed there?" exclaimed Victor Astwell. "What a splendid solution!"

"Ah!" said Poirot gently. "But it was not that curtain."

He wheled around and pointed to the curtain that masked the little staircase.

"Sir Reuben used the bedroom the night prior to the crime. He breakfasted in bed, and he had Mr. Trefusis up there to give him instructions. I don't know what it was that Mr. Trefusis left in that bedroom, but there was something. When he said good-night to Sir Reuben and Lady Astwell, he remembered this thing and ran up the stairs to fetch it. I don't think either the husband or wife noticed him, for they had already begun a violent discussion. They were in the middle of this quarrel, when Mr. Trefusis came down the stairs again.

"The things they were saying to each other were of so intimate and personal a nature that Mr. Trefusis was placed in a very awkward position. It was clear to him that they imagined he had left the room some time ago. Fearing to arouse Sir Reuben's anger against himself, he decided to remain where he was and slip out later. He stayed there behind the curtain, and as Lady Astwell left the room she subconsciously noticed the outline of his form there.

"When Lady Astwell had left the room, Trefusis tried to steal out unobserved, but Sir Reuben happened to turn his head, and became aware of the secretary's presence. Already in a bad temper, Sir Reuben hurled abuse at his secretary, and accused him of deliberately eavesdropping and spying.

"*Messieurs* and *Mesdames*, I am a student of psychology. All through this case I have looked, not for the bad-tempered man or woman, for bad temper is its own safety valve. He who can bark does not bite. No, I have looked for the good-tempered man, for the man who is patient and self-controlled, for the man who for nine years has played the part of the under-dog. There is no strain so great as that which has endured for years, there is no resentment like that which accumulates slowly.

"For nine years Sir Reuben has bullied and browbeaten his secretary, and for nine years that man has endured in silence. But there comes a day when at last the strain reaches its breaking point. *Something snaps!* It was so that night. Sir Reuben sat down at his desk again, but the secretary, instead of turning humbly and meekly to the door, picks up the heavy wooden club, and strikes down the man who had bullied him once too often."

He turned to Trefusis, who was staring at him as though turned to stone.

"It was so simple, your alibi. Mr. Astwell thought you were in your

room, but *no one saw you go there.* You were just stealing up to bed after you had struck down Sir Reuben, when you heard a sound, and you hastened back to cover, behind the curtain. You were behind there when Charles Leverson entered the room, you were there when Lily Margrave came. It was not till long after that that you crept up through a silent house to your bedroom. Do you deny it?"

He advanced upon the quivering man. Trefusis began to stammer.

"I—I never——"

"Ah! Let us finish this. For two weeks now I have played the comedy, I have showed you the net closing slowly around you. The finger-prints, footprints, the search of your room with the things artistically replaced. I have struck terror into you with all of this; you have lain awake at night fearing and wondering; did you leave a fingerprint in the room or a footprint somewhere?

"Again and again you have gone over the events of that night wondering what you have done or left undone, and so I brought you to the state where you made a slip. I saw the fear leap into your eyes today when I picked up something from the stairs where you had stood hidden that night. Then I made a great parade, the little box, the entrusting of it to George, and I go out."

Poirot turned toward the door.

"George?"

"I am here, sir."

The valet came forward.

"Will you tell these ladies and gentlemen what my instructions to you were?"

"I was to remain concealed in the wardrobe in your room, sir, having placed the cardboard box where you told me to. At half-past three this afternoon, sir, Mr. Trefusis entered the room; he went to the drawer, and took out the box in question."

"And in that box," continued Poirot, "was a common pin. Me, I speak always the truth. I did pick up something on the stairs this morning. That is your English saying, is it not? 'See a pin and pick it up, all the day you'll have good luck.' Me, I have had good luck, I have found the murderer."

He turned to the secretary.

"You see?" he said gently, "you betrayed yourself."

Suddenly Trefusis broke down. He sunk into a chair sobbing, his face buried in his hands.

"I was mad," he groaned. "I was mad. But, oh, my God, he badgered and bullied me beyond bearing. For years I had hated and loathed him."

"I knew!" cried Lady Astwell.

She sprang forward, her face irradiated with a kind of savage triumph.

"I *knew* that man had done it."

She stood there, savage and triumphant.

"And you were right," said Poirot. "One may call things by different names, but the fact remains. Your 'intuition,' Lady Astwell, proved correct. I felicitate you."

A Slight Misapprehension

By DALE COLLINS

This is the fourth of a series of short stories retailing the startling adventures of PETER LAMB.

MOST men in the circumstances would have been swept away by the glamor of the setting. Little Mr. Lamb kept his wits about him, and saw at once that the lady was an Adventuress. He decided, also, that this was a trap.

The night was hot and full of moonshine. Between the road and the sea lay a narrow strip of vegetation through which, at times, the gleam of the silver water could be seen.

To little Mr. Lamb pacing along this romantic road, his sun-umbrella neatly furled and his shoulders stooped in the fashion of a scholar, had come the sound of sobbing.

Mr. Lamb checked, his head perked on one side like a spry bird's, and wondered what this could mean. Parting the bushes, he investigated, and then, adjusting his pince-nez on his nose, weighed the situation.

Before him lay a beach of pearl and a sea of pearl encased in a sky which made it seem that all the world was set in the heart of a pearl. Nor was this all. Upon a large rock sat a beautiful lady, weeping like any Niobe, and she wore pink silk pajamas.

A fool would have rushed to the rescue, but Mr. Lamb considered and peered. It was as a result of this cautious inspection that he was informed in good time of the fact that the lady was an Adventuress.

Her hair was golden, but its gold was the work of an alchemist, the lines of her figure were seductive, but a trifle too much so, and her face had been more beautiful once—in a bold and dashing way—than it was at the moment.

The whole effect, if pleasing, conveyed to little Mr. Lamb a most decided warning. And he was reminded that lovely ladies did not weep in silk pajamas on lonely beaches without some good reason.

And yet, knowing all this, little Mr. Lamb decided that the adventure was one which might profitably be investigated.

He stepped out onto that magic beach, and his small humdrum figure seemed exotic there—as a Rajah's magnificence would seem exotic in an English cathedral town.

With hesitating steps, he moved down to beauty in distress and stood beside her; but she wept too much to be conscious of him. Therefore, to assist her, he announced himself by a discreet and nervous cough.

The lady was startled.

'Oh!" she cried, looking up at him wide-eyed, her mouth a-tremble. Her arms made twining movements as if she hoped to weave them into a boudoir wrap.

It was well enough done, Mr. Lamb admitted to himself.

"Madam," he said, twirling his hat, "though a stranger, I ventured to intrude because I see you are in distress of some kind. I hope I may be of help. My action may be rash, but my intentions are the best. If I can do nothing, you have only to say the word and I'll leave you."

He made his prim bow.

Throughout this speech the blue and tear-dimmed eyes considered him in astonishment, as if they found him quite incredible.

Mr. Lamb knew that the outcome would be satisfactory. His appearance gave the lady the excuse she needed for overcoming her qualms. He looked so palpably honest, so decidedly innocent, so distinctly unlike the dashing cavalier. There was no call, even in the cause of art, to refuse him every confidence.

The lady stared at him for a time in silence and then decided in his favor. Mr. Lamb had to admit that the surrender, if rather hackneyed, was well enough done.

"Why," she said, "why——" and paused. "Who are you? I don't even know your name. I've never seen you before. How did you come here?"

"I am Peter Lamb, madam," said the gentle voice. "By occupation I am a designer of stained glass, but I am traveling in the East for experience and pleasure. If I can be of assistance——"

THE bait was irresistible. It always was. Mr. Lamb observed the ghost of a smile pass over the tragic features, and he experienced the pride of a master-craftsman in his own perfection. He betrayed no triumph, however, for to have done so would have been to shatter that very perfection.

The lady extended her hand a little in a friendly gesture, as if she still marveled at this odd comforter.

"There is nothing—nothing you can do?" she said softly. "But it is very good of you to make the offer. Leave me to my troubles. It would be much wiser. Other people's troubles are poor things with which to meddle."

"Not at all! Not at all!" said Mr. Lamb.

He saw no reason why her job should be made more difficult, and so he sat down beside her on the sand, but unobtrusively, so that she would not feel called upon to protest.

"Tell me!" he pleaded.

As an actress the lady was worthy of praise. She succeeded in conveying just that note of wondering patronage and sympathy which all the world felt for little Mr. Lamb. He had come to comfort her, but she seemed to feel the urge to comfort him, and this was in accordance with past experience. His estimation of her increased.

"It's so—so extraordinary," she breathed. "You drop suddenly out of the sky, find me here in pajamas, don't seem at all astonished, and only want to help me. And you make me feel as if I had known you for a long time; as if I could trust you as I would my own brother. Really, I don't know whether I'm awake or dreaming. But, oh, I need sympathy from someone—and a stranger better than anybody!"

"Then tell me," said Mr. Lamb in a tone no louder than the whisper of the sea on the sand, "for, indeed, nothing would please me more than to be of service!"

It was, as has been stated, a tropical night, full of the mystery of the moon, musical with the voices of the insects and the tiny wavelets, and they were all alone.

The hour was well-suited to the unburdening of a weary heart. Mr.

Lamb, mild and unobtrusive, made the best of listeners, his glance turning ever and anon from the distant jewels of the lights of Soorakata to those nearer gems, his lady's eyes.

But, truth to tell, he was rather disappointed in the tale. As an artist he appreciated art, but this narrative struck him as being clumsy, old-fashioned, lacking all imagination and distinction.

It was no more than the time-worn story of the cruel, jealous husband and the ill-treated wife languishing in misery, and it was told in the old stock phrases without a single new feature. The only point which called for praise was the reluctance with which the lady began and with which she proceeded.

Apart from this, the performance was no better than those which suffice to part sailors and their pay at small public houses by the docks.

In the good cause Mr. Lamb suffered it without protest. He was not an instructor in roguery, and if others lacked skill he made no complaint, though his sense of decency was outraged.

"My poor, dear lady," he murmured at intervals, and such things, having no spirit to give her scope to display any real talent she might possess. A less perfect master of craft would have been swept away by mocking laughter, but Mr. Lamb was content to wonder that people with enough initiative to see him wandering along that lonely road and set a trap for his return should show such scanty talent in their business.

He continued, however, to play his part nobly, for Mr. Lamb was one of the few who, in these days of doubt and disillusion, clung to the old belief that virtue is rewarded.

THE lady had reached a poignant point in her history, when Mr. Lamb heard the bushes rustle. He had not been wasting his time, and he knew exactly what to do. He drew closer and fell forward on one knee, absorbed and rapt. His gaze was turned upon her features with the keenest concern.

It was not necessary to hold the pose for long. The lady started suddenly, gave a suppressed scream and shrank back, quivering, her face a mask of dismay.

At the same moment a heavy hand descended upon little Mr. Lamb's shoulder.

"My husband!" gasped the lady.

The heavy hand wrenched little Mr. Lamb about. His heart was raised by hope, but at the first glance all his expectations were dashed. There was to be no improvement. It was all to be crude, horribly crude, only fit for small-town stuff and antiquated in Victorian days.

This husband, who arrived so opportunely, was a tall, dark man with flashing eyes and flashing teeth, his face contorted with jealousy, his clothing absurdly disordered.

The whole ensemble was so overdone that it was quite unseemly. With a pang of disgust Mr. Lamb heard the melodramatic, overacting ass hiss at him.

"So," said the husband, "I've caught you!"

For one moment little Mr. Lamb was tempted to throw aside his rôle, refuse to take any further part in this farce, and administer a well-merited rebuke and much needed instruction.

But from his inner consciousness there flashed the story his old mother had told him of the one bad apple corrupting the whole case. He mastered the impulse. He would not be corrupted.

If these people were clumsy, uninspired practitioners, that was no reason why he should fall from his own standard. They would have to be taught by example for the good of

the profession which they brought into disrepute.

Accordingly, he cringed, but decently and decorously and naturally, becoming an innocent man in the grip of terrifying and compromising circumstances with which he was unable to deal.

He cowered, but not too much; he glanced about for succor and yet in fear of onlookers; he cried in the spirit for a policeman to arise from the strange and foreign wall of the jungle.

"I—I don't understand," he stuttered. "Please let me go. I'm doing no harm here. I—I found this lady crying here, and I sought to help her."

"Don't lie to me!" the dark man advised, grim as death, his steely grip tightening.

Mr. Lamb made a sharp cry of pain and appealed to the lady.

"But isn't that so?"

"Indeed it is!" wept the lady, a-tremble, beside herself with terror.

"You—be silent," her husband commanded through his teeth. "You'd defend him, would you? You impudent baggage! I catch you here in your pajamas—with—with him, and you'd try to have the effrontery to brazen it out!"

Mr. Lamb longed to point out that such archaisms as "baggage" and "brazen it out" belonged to the unreal world behind the footlights, but instead he bleated protests:

"But—but—I—I tell you it's true! I don't know what you're driving at. Let me go—or I'll call for the police!"

"You'll not call for the police," came the firm answer. "Guilty men don't call for the police. And what would you tell them if they came—that you were my wife's lover and I'd caught you? Anyway, there are no police out here—no one but ourselves!"

He grated the last words out meaningly. Mr. Lamb writhed anew, though from a quite different emotion than his captor believed.

The lady suddenly sprang forward and flung herself on her knees before them, her hands flung out appealingly to her husband.

"Paul," she cried, "how can you be so unfair, so devilish? You know you turned me out of the house like this—to sleep where I could! You know all this is your fault. How can you blame him, that poor little man? He only meant to be kind and tender and good!"

"He," said Paul darkly, "meant to be lots of things, no doubt! How dare you lie to me like that? I turn *you* out in your night attire? Good God, woman, you're crazy. Do you think I don't know you stole out after I'd gone to bed—shamelessly, like this, to your assignation?"

"Please! Please! Please!" cried his lady, in an agony.

"Tut! Tut!" thought Mr. Lamb. "Unconvincing!"

"Enough of this, Sybil," stormed Paul. "I'm going to take my time over this and straighten it out for once and for all. Come along! I've had enough of this vile beach—this precious trysting-ground of yours. Up to the house with you, and we'll have this out, man to man!"

Mr. Lamb's panic intensified.

"I won't go!" he declared, with the noisy shrillness of the weak.

"You will!" said Paul.

"No! No! You can't make me, and I——"

"Can't I make you? Look!"

As he spoke the villain—he was horribly villainous, mused Mr. Lamb—produced a sinister revolver from his pocket and thrust it into his victim's ribs.

"This," he said, "is the best argument. Now, go! And if you attempt to run away I'll shoot you down like a dog!"

His voice rose on the last word with a world of scorn.

"All right, but I protest!" said Mr. Lamb. "I——"

He could say no more. He walked before his captor like a man in a horrible dream, obeying his instructions about the way by instinct, and turning over in his mind the best manner to profit by this situation and punish the evil-doers.

He heard the lady shedding tears, which were a waste of effort, and was peeved by the farcical grimness of the man with the revolver.

THEY sat about the table on the veranda, and the lamplight fell upon them, theatrically. All around was the jungle, and the silence of the night was threatening. Mr. Lamb had to admit that the sitting was impressive.

The big man toyed with the revolver and brooded upon Mr. Lamb, but he was much calmer now. Mr. Lamb thought the recovery inartistic. It should have been done much more gradually.

However, he was making the best of a bad job, just as one made allowances for theatrical shows outside the cities.

Paul spoke abruptly:

"You understand that for two pins I'd shoot you dead, you little worm?"

Mr. Lamb could make no answer.

"Oh, Mr. Lamb," Sybil pleaded urgently, "do believe him. He's mad with jealousy. Oh, indeed, he'll do it."

"There should be," mused Mr. Lamb, "a greater delicacy in these things—a gradual advance from point to point.

"Paul, do be reasonable! Do realize the madness of what you're doing. This man's as innocent as a babe! Oh, what can I say?"

She broke off helplessly, wringing her hands in distress, a picture calculated to strike terror into the heart of any Mr. Lamb trapped in that isolated bungalow.

"You can say nothing," said Paul. "You can keep silent. I'm going to talk with your lover. He's the one who interests me."

He turned his smoldering eyes upon the luckless victim.

"You heard what she said? I'll shoot you right enough, and don't forget it. I don't know who you are, but I suppose you come over here in the bi-weekly steamer from Singapore. How long has this been going on?

"These secret meetings on the beach in pajamas? These visits to the house when I'm away on the other side of the island? Do you think the boys haven't told me? Do you think my own house servants can be bribed into secrecy. How long has this been going on?"

Mr. Lamb knew that by this time he was expected to be beyond resistance. Accordingly he shuffled in helpless agony, but as he did so he wondered whether these people were such awful bunglers that the revolver pointing at him was loaded. He dismissed the fancy, however. There was a limit beyond which the greatest fools did not venture.

"You won't answer, eh? There are ways of making you answer, remember!"

"Paul," Sybil broke in, "I appeal to you again!"

"Be silent," Paul ordered. "Do you think you can talk me out of my revenge? Do you think you can dupe me now, as you've duped me all along? I might have forgiven you—it would at least have been more understandable—if you'd chosen someone worthy of you, but to be carrying on with a miserable, dirty little worm like that! It's too much, I tell you!"

MR. LAMB thought it was too much, but he accepted the compliment in the

epithets with satisfaction. Apart from his professional annoyance he was enjoying the situation, and waiting with amused satisfaction to turn the tables. It was glamorous and strange on that veranda. The witchery of the East lay upon it. His emotions, however, did not alter the fact that he was an agitated and bewildered citizen flurrying madly in a snare.

"The devil of it is," Paul stormed after consideration, "that, as usual, the wrongdoers are in the strong position. If I shoot you both I am ruining my own life, also. If I expose you——"

"Exposure!" gasped little Mr. Lamb as if the word had echoed through the secret places of his soul.

Paul made no answer. He brooded again.

"All the same," he said, "I shan't be cheated of my revenge. Nobody knows you're here. I could tie you up and torture you. I could make you pay for every kiss you've stolen; for all you've robbed me of. I could keep you here for weeks, months, years. I'm stronger than you! Oh, I could make you pay—here!"

To Mr. Lamb's disgust, the man licked his lips.

"Tut! Tut!" thought Mr. Lamb.

"Paul!" sobbed the lady.

"Shut up!"

Mr. Lamb could stand no more. He had been patient, he had given them every chance, and they had failed. It remained for him to administer his rebuke and return to the ship. He could waste no more time on a matter which showed no promise of profit, though the thought of blackmailing blackmailers was attractive.

This, indeed, had been his object throughout, but the more he considered it the less it appealed to him as a worthy enterprise. Such tyros would be poor game. They would have nothing, and he would be left in the position of the informer.

Professional scorn was no excuse for sending a man to goal. But, having reached this decision, he played the comedy out to the end.

"I have been caught," he said, suddenly and brokenly. "Further denials are useless. But, as you yourself say, exposure would put the greatest shame on you; murder would send you to the gallows. I suggest, further, that torture would become a bore!"

He paused with a reasonable gesture. Paul sat there with a look of blank astonishment on his face which suggested that, dull as he was, the warning of impending disaster had reached him. Sybil sat bolt upright, like a woman of stone. Little Mr. Lamb smiled.

"Come now," he said, "I have a suggestion to make."

"You have *what?*" thundered Paul.

"A suggestion to make. You have caught me. We are agreed you can't expose, torture or kill me. You, naturally, want to be well rid of me.

"I want to get away from the East. I want to go home—make a clean break and start again. Very well! My suggestion is this: I'll go away. Neither you nor your wife shall ever see me again—that is if you give me twelve hundred and fifty dollars for my passage money!"

He held out his hands, urging the good sense of all this. If Paul had been surprised before, he was frozen with amazement now. He seemed incapable of speech, thought or movement; he was like a man paralyzed. Sybil began to sway into a faint, but gripped the table. Paul was restored to his senses in a flash.

"By heaven, I'll do it," he roared. "I'll ship you away, but first I'll flog every inch of flesh off your back!"

Things happened then. It was little Mr. Lamb's habit to think quickly,

but he had never thought more quickly than he did in that moment.

"Not blackmail — reality!" The truth electrified him.

He saw Paul springing toward him; he saw Sybil flinging herself at her husband, and then little Mr. Lamb saw nothing at all, for he was running like a madman through the darkest night, whipped by bushes and branches, tripping and stumbling, but always fleeing with the threat of death upon his heels and the dew of death upon his brow. He was many miles from Soorakata.

MONSIEUR VERLAQUE, proprietor of Soorakata's best hotel, lifted his glass and nodded at little Mr. Lamb over its green contents.

"Indeed, monsieur has been fortunate to escape," he said. "That gentleman, Paul Rayner, is quite sane upon all things and mad upon one as are so many. He is madly jealous of his wife, monsieur—crazy—as you English say—'quite cracked,' yes. Whether she has a lover I know not, but he believes it and there are others who do. For myself——"

He shrugged.

"She is most charming!" he added.

"And this," sighed little Mr. Lamb, wiping his still fevered brow, "is what comes of tampering with honest, decent citizens. Why do rogues do it? How do they survive?"

"Pardon?" asked M. Verlaque, politely.

"You would not understand," said Mr. Lamb enigmatically. "I am a shark-catcher by profession. What I said was a trade secret!"

"The English are all mad!" mourned M. Verlaque.

The fifth story in this series will appear in our next issue, out April 15. It will be called "The Sidney Street Affair."

It Happened to Captain Kidd

Tom Moore, the famous Irish poet, relates this story told him by Captain Kidd.

The Captain was asleep one night in his berth when he was awakened by a pressure on his limbs. In the dim light he seemed to see his brother in uniform stretched across the bed. Thinking it an illusion, he shut his eyes to sleep. It happened again.

When he was aroused the third time and still seemed to see his brother, he put out his hand to touch the uniform and found it soaking wet. Getting out of bed, he summoned the mate, but the vision had disappeared.

The mate insisted that it must all have been a dream, but the captain, hard-headed realist that he was, remained unconvinced and said that something was wrong with his brother.

When he reached port, he received word that his brother, who was in the same service, had been drowned in the Indian Seas on the very night that he had seen him lying across his berth.

The brothers had always been great pals.

Who?

By RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS

WHETHER I have been a skeptical observer of a supernatural drama or the superstitious witness of a natural tragedy I do not know. But this I can say: I tell a story of the rare courage of Theodore Silton or of the transcendent will of Morton Durk. The facts are yours for the reading, but you must furnish your own explanation.

Only one thing would have driven Theodore Silton to Mineola. Consequently, when he asked me to go with him to that rookery of flying men, my surprise was dispelled by his mention of a rare Japanese print that he hoped to secure.

When we started, Theodore huddled into a corner of the lounge-like rear seat of his luxurious sedan and, despite the mildness of the spring day, thrust his thin white hands into his overcoat pockets with a shiver. Satisfied that he was as comfortable as possible, he spoke:

"A Japanese diplomat, Ichiryusai Okjima, whose collection of prints perhaps equals my own, recently came to this country on a mission for his government. During his inspection of the army field at Mineola he desired, for some incomprehensible reason, to make a flight. A Lieutenant Durk was detailed to pilot him. While in the air something went wrong. Only through the skill and daring of the aviator did they land safely.

"I remember!" I exclaimed. "Morton Durk, you know, is a rough mechanic with none too savory a reputation; but he is, nevertheless, the most intrepid pilot in the country. That's what won his commission. He loves the air as other men love life itself. On this occasion the controls jammed and at three thousand feet he——"

Theodore Silton screwed up his pale, oldish young face to express his disapproval of the turn the conversation had taken and held up an impatient hand.

"Yes, yes," he said. "That's not important. The big thing is that the envoy, safe in Japan, sent this Durk a very fine Utamaro as a token of his appreciation. Durk has since left the army — by request, it is rumored — and is flying at Mineola on his own account."

"And you want the print," I concluded his narrative.

Theodore nodded eagerly, and his enthusiasm restored the youth that belonged there to his thoughtful countenance.

"I want that print," he agreed. "That is why we are motoring on this damp spring day when we might both be snug in my study."

"The ride will do you good, even if you have sealed up the windows of this car," I said unsympathetically. "You should get out in the air and shake off this almost wooden indifference to everything but a few forms of art."

But Theodore merely cleared his throat and turned the conversation from his own physical shortcomings to the art of Utamaro.

The super-efficient chauffeur on the

box rolled us along the roads at a pace as swift as the comfort of his employer would permit.

Finally we sped through the gates of the government reservation at Mineola, past the low barrack buildings and up to the edge of the field.

On the broad flat plane of grass, in a long line, airplanes patched and dull and airplanes new and shining, stood with wings outstretched, like great birds petrified in flight.

Our car stopped, by Theodore's direction, in front of a little group of leather-clad pilots who stood beside a small, short-winged airplane. None glanced in our direction as Theodore, animated by the possible proximity of a Utamaro, stepped briskly to the ground to make his inquiries.

When I saw among the young fliers a tall, muscular, wind-burned man with aggressive, almost belligerent features, that no newspaper photograph could blur, I knew we had found Durk.

Despite his dismissal, if it was such, he had not hesitated to return to the army field for a visit.

THERE was an aura of dominance about the aviator that had impressed me even in his picture. And with it, I now perceived, there was a faint suggestion of cruelty, or of power turned carelessly to selfish purposes.

Rightly or wrongly, I rated him as mentally somewhat below the other youthful airmen, who so obviously deferred to him. He seemed all body and energy, like the airplane beside him.

Durk shared the center of the circle of laughing aviators with a girl, as lithe and as magnetically alive as himself.

It was plain that, physically, the woman was as perfect as the man, though she had dulled her natural grace by overmuch finery and cosmetics.

Durk's gaze stabbed at her unceasingly with a seriousness incongruous in that carefree gathering.

It was obvious at a glance that to the great passion of his life, love of the air, Durk had added love of a woman. In the midst of the light talk the girl covertly stimulated his fascination.

Theodore, who had been pausing, after his slight burst of energy, turned to me for support.

"We've found our man at the first try," I said. "The tall pilot with the unstrapped helmet is Morton Durk."

"Who is that girl?" Theodore asked.

"I don't know."

"She looks like an actress," he observed as if that condemned her forever.

Somewhat idly I compared her with a theoretical girl who might be Theodore's selection as the woman to share his life. Sun and moon were not further apart.

"I hope I can get him to part with the Utamaro," Theodore said uneasily. "He seems a determined sort of chap."

I moved toward the group, drawing him with me. But on the edge he hesitated, fearing to break into a loud duel of words between Durk and the girl, which now engrossed the pilots.

"Think how lonely I'd be up there," Durk said appealingly. "Come on, Viviette; we'll go cloud-punching together."

"I won't!" she retorted in the imperious tone of a shallow woman sure of her power.

A sombre light appeared in the eyes that Durk fixed so steadily on her.

"You got to fly with me, Viviette."

He laid a big hand compellingly on her shoulder.

"Take care!" she warned, her eyes flaming.

For a moment I expected this ele-

mental man to lift her into the machine. But his hand dropped from her shoulder and his eyes from her face. He stood abashed.

"All right," he growled, with primitive disregard for the presence of the others. "I suppose I can't make you fly with me. But—somebody must fly with me! I must have company in the air!"

His wandering eyes dropped to the smaller figure of Theodore.

"Here's a little fellow just dying for a flip!" he cried. "You want to go up, don't you?"

"No! No!" wailed Theodore in startled terror, as Durk's huge hand thumped his back. "I want to buy that Japanese print Mr. Okjima sent you."

The other pilots joined in Durk's great laugh.

"Buy my glorified laundry ticket! No! What you really want is a hop through the atmosphere. It's the life, old scout! What do you say?"

"No!" Theodore cried. "I'll give you a thousand, unseen."

"A thousand and a little jump over the field to clinch the bargain," Durk replied.

"Two thousand," said Theodore, shrinking away.

I became aware of the girl standing beside me. She had been looking steadily, under her beaded eyelashes, at this inconspicuous appearing young man who had thousands to spend on one Japanese print. And as I glanced at her she met my eyes.

"Who's he?" she demanded, moving her head sharply to indicate Theodore.

"His name is Theodore Silton," I answered somewhat curtly.

"Fifth Avenue Siltons?" she inquired without hesitation.

I nodded and dismissed the subject by turning toward Durk. The airman had been somewhat startled by the casual way in which Theodore had doubled his bid, but it was quite plain that avarice, at least, had no part in his make-up.

"A thousand and a flight," Durk answered firmly. "A nice stunting flight. That's settled, boy. But I'll promise you this: I'll land you safe in one piece. Don't worry. My word's good here, or in heaven or hell."

HIS compelling, almost hypnotic gaze settled on Theodore. If ever stronger will, detached from intellect, overpowered a mind, it was then. I started forward, but paused.

A flight with this man, probably the surest pilot in the country, might be good for my friend. It would be a tonic.

However, interference with Durk's plans came from another source. Unexpectedly, the girl Viviette stepped forward boldly.

"Wait a minute, Mort, wait a minute!" she commanded. Her voice was high and confident. "What do you mean by insisting that this gentleman has to ride with you if he don't want to?"

"You again?" exclaimed Durk. "Who appointed you flying officer in charge of this field?"

Without ceremony he picked up a flying helmet and pulled it on Theodore's head.

"I did," she said promptly, and, with a quick gesture she jerked the helmet off again and threw it on the ground.

Theodore feebly protested against this indignity, but not even I heard what he said. The spectacle of the big, scowling man and the infuriated woman, red under her rouge, held us all.

When Durk spoke again it was apparent that there was a tinge of uncertainty in his tone.

"It takes a woman to mess things up," he complained. "I tell you he's willing, but bashful. You want a hop,

little guy, don't you?' He bent his commanding gaze upon my friend.

"No!" said Theodore promptly. "I have no hesitancy in saying that I do not."

"That's the way," said Viviette encouragingly, and laid her gloved hand for an instant upon Theodore's shoulder. Then, archly, she drew it away again. "Stand up to him!"

Theodore regarded her with frank curiosity.

I saw Durk's fist double up.

"It's an insult to refuse to fly with me," he roared.

He glanced swiftly at Viviette, and I read in his gaze a certain fleeting contempt, despite the obvious fascination she exerted over him.

"An insult," he reiterated, and stepped toward Theodore.

Panic-stricken, my friend drew back, but Durk was upon him. With a mighty muscular effort he gripped Theodore by the ribs. In a stride he was beside the cockpit of the plane and swung the helpless body of my friend high in the air.

Theodore wailed vehement objection, and Viviette, like a tiger kitten, bounded toward Durk.

But before she could interfere Durk had completed the swing by lowering Theodore gently to the ground on the other side of the cockpit. He turned to laugh in the face of the furious girl.

"All right; he's had his flight," he said. "I'll have to call that my revenge, for I can't hit him. The S. P. C. A. is very particular about white rabbits."

"You big brute!" Viviette shrilled. "How dare you touch a gentleman! You never were nothing but an ordinary low-down mechanic that could fly."

She paused for epithets that would not echo too harshly in the ears of a Fifth Avenue Silton.

But Theodore had plucked up some scanty courage when Durk had declared he could not hit him. He came around the tail of the plane, and at some distance confronted the airman:

"Physically you are my superior," he said coldly. "But mentally you're a clod and a dullard. I do not know but that a beating would make an impression on you. Come, we will go."

And somewhat hastily he sidled toward me, ignoring Durk's ready laughter. He glanced at the girl and raised his hat, then gave a tug at my sleeve and marched toward his car with as much dignity as he could muster.

I MUST confess that the affair had amused me, and certainly it had roused my companion to the reality of things other than *objets d'art*.

As the car rolled us toward New York, he showed plainly that he was tremendously stirred by what had happened.

"Strange how compelling that crude fellow was," he muttered after five miles of silent contemplation of the expedition. "He literally dominated me for an instant."

He did not seem to expect any answer, so I made none. "She—I am not entirely convinced that her interference was upon my behalf. It was more her wish to oppose her will to Durk's than to aid me, do you not think?"

He looked at me anxiously, as if he hoped I would disagree.

"Something of the sort," I agreed dryly.

I caught him eyeing me without special favor. He did not speak again for some minutes.

"Rather a vulgar type, and quite possibly, as I said before, an actress," he murmured.

"Yes," I answered, discouragingly non-committal.

"I—I hope I am not misjudging her."

"The thought is worthy of you," I assured him, and ignored the opportunity he gave me to go on.

"Do you know," he burst out candidly after the pause, "I am not, as a general rule, attractive to women. They look for the gifts of the body, if I may put it so, rather than the gifts of the mind. Especially that kind of woman. And yet, it is possible that she saw in me more than the average woman sees."

"There I agree," I said with cynical amusement. "I should say she saw several million things more than the average woman — *dollars*, to be exact."

"You are harsh, indeed," he censured. "I am not at all sure that I may not be interesting to a woman aside from my wealth. And I am quite frank to admit that she—Viviette, I believe her name is—captured my attention at the time."

"We have left Mineola now," I said, "and I think you may be thankful that we are away from it complete in body and pocketbook, even if you did leave the Utamaro behind. Let us think of other things. Somehow that field depressed me."

"The Utamaro!" he exclaimed. "By Jove, I had forgotten the Utamaro!"

"Continue to do so," I counseled rather soberly. "I have an idea that it will be well for you to dismiss that particular art treasure from your mind."

"Undoubtedly you are right," he averred. "Were I not a strong-minded man I——"

But then he fell silent, and as a few moments later we skimmed over the bridge into New York I never heard the conclusion of the sentence.

IT was not until several days later that I found time to call upon Theodore to ascertain whether his experience at Mineola had had any bad effects. Then, to my astonishment, the butler informed me that he was not at home. And my surprise became tinged with an inexplicable alarm when the butler, knowing me for one of Theodore's few familiars, confided that he had instructed the chauffeur to take him to Mineola.

I lost no time in following him, but the train seemed intolerably slow. Theodore was not at the military field, but I found him by inquiring for the aerodrome at which Durk kept his planes.

His appearance was a shock to me. Grotesque, in a flying suit, he stood beside that same plane watching a working mechanic who was perched precariously on top of the motor. Beside him stood the girl, Viviette, and confronting them both, with his hands on his hips and a broad smile twisting his heavy lips, was Morton Durk.

Theodore greeted me somewhat shamefacedly, the others casually.

"Thought I'd come to make another effort to obtain the print," he explained to me. "Mr. Durk insists on my flying with him first, however, and as I've conquered my fear of the air, I'm going to try it."

He glanced distrustfully up at the mechanic.

"Oh, just putting a few more bits of string around the engine so it won't fall out when I loop," Durk answered with a grin that was too cruel to be pleasing.

Instant alarm contorted Theodore's face.

"Look here, you aren't going to do any tricks—stunts, you call them—while I'm with you!" he protested.

"Yeah?" inquired Durk. "I'm going to turn her inside-out so you can see the lining, little one."

"Oh, no, you're not," Viviette interrupted. "I won't let you stunt him."

I was surprised to see how proprietary her tone was as she referred to Theodore. I glanced at him questioningly. He smiled uncertainly, and then looked rather maliciously at Morton Durk.

"What's the matter, Viviette?" demanded Durk, and I could see that Theodore's complacency rankled. "You going to adopt this little shrimp?"

Viviette boldly patted Theodore's ruffled shoulder.

"He's a friend of mine, and no friend of mine gets a rough deal from you," she said meaningly. "I'm not interested in you, Mort Durk, and you know it. If you want to make a hit with me, go easy on Mr. Silton. If you don't——" She shrugged her shoulders and stared at him with cold eyes.

"I—I'm not going to get into that plane at all," Theodore announced fearfully. "The—the idea of stunting is repugnant to me."

"You don't get your Utamaro till you do," Durk announced, turning from the girl.

He stared curiously at the thin, uneasy figure of Theodore, rubbed the side of his head above his ear, and then burst out:

"You know, I'm a mech. I was born in a machine shop and brought up in a garage. I drink gasoline and eat grease and live in the air. I know all there is about machinery. But I'm damned if I see what makes a little one-lunged quarter-horsepower thing like you tick."

Theodore stiffened. "I knew I was demeaning myself to come here to talk to you," he said. "I can't understand it. You're a moron; an obvious case of arrested development; body without a mind or soul. You have the spiritual life of a pig. And yet——"

He regarded Durk with a puzzled intensity that matched the airman's. Then he made a move to unbutton the flying suit in which he was enveloped.

Durk laughed raucously, and thumped Theodore on the back until he cringed. Then he half led, half pushed him toward the plane.

"Come on, you bunny," he said. "I'll give you a hop free of charge."

"No!" wailed Theodore, although he apparently could not resist Durk's dominating hand on his back.

"It's all right, you jellybean, I won't stunt."

"You're sure you won't do any tricks?" Theodore inquired, struggling half-heartedly as Durk heaved him into the cockpit.

"My word's good here, or in heaven or hell," the pilot declared, voicing the same boast that he had made on the day these two strange opposites came together.

He jerked his head around to look at Viviette, who was hesitating on the verge of speech.

"Don't you interfere, you," he warned harshly.

"You're a roughneck," she flamed. "You were brought up in the mud, and you'll die in the mud, despite your fine flying."

Her angry prophecy shocked me, but he laughed mockingly at her burst of temper. Then, as the mechanic climbed down, Durk shouted loudly:

"Turn it over!"

A moment later they were in the air, and the plane thundered its rhythmic song as it mounted skyward. I watched intently, not half believing that Morton Durk would refrain from stunting; but not once did the plane vary in its regular progress. Apparently Durk's word was as good as he had proclaimed it, at least in the air.

BUT despite the mildness of the flight when the machine landed, a very white and quivering Theodore Silton

was lifted from the cockpit by Morton Durk.

Never had I seen a man so badly frightened. The thunder of the motor, the blast of the air, the ground, first rushing beneath the plane and finally dropping away—all these new sensations had combined to put my scholarly friend in a state of nervous collapse.

Viviette pounced upon him as Durk endeavored to balance him on his yielding legs. She thrust me aside with a carefully manicured hand and put her arm around his waist.

"Poor l a m b !" she exclaimed. "Here, let me! Come, Theodore, you must go home at once."

"Put him back in his cotton batting," jeered Durk. "He's no good here."

By dint of soothing words and encouragement she succeeded in making him walk as far as the car. But when I followed and endeavored to enter, she slammed the door with sudden emphasis in my face. Giving a curt word of command to the chauffeur, she helped Theodore to drop back on the cushions. Before I could overcome my surprise, the car glided away.

I turned to watch it, and discovered that Durk, with an ugly grin, was watching, too.

"That's her game, is it?" he exclaimed. "Well, I'll—— What in hell are you looking at?"

It seemed no time to talk to him, so I started to walk away. He did not let me go far, however.

"Hey, you!" he shouted, before I had gone twenty feet, and hurried after me.

"Look here," he said. "Are there many damn fools like that little guy who spend their time and cash buying junk like that Jap poster?"

"Quite a few," I answered. "More than you'd think."

He surveyed me with sombre eyes. "Suppose you're telling the truth," he growled. "You wouldn't have nerve enough to lie to me, anyhow."

He paused to give me time to contradict him.

"Well, I spent twenty-five minutes last night staring at that damn thing, trying to find out what in blazes it was all about. Twenty-five minutes I might have blown in on poker! You can crash me if I know what's comin' over me. Twenty-five minutes!

"And I was so wuzzy at the end of it I begun to think maybe there was somethin' about it. This little geek is gettin' me all mixed up. I'll break his measly neck for him with two fingers if he fools around with my girl. Tell him so!"

That, apparently, was my dismissal, so I went. But I carried with me a strange sense of foreboding.

It was to convey Durk's message that I called Theodore that night, only to hear again that he was out. It took some prodding of the discreet butler to learn the facts, but I finally gathered from his guarded utterances that Theodore, after having been brought home by "a young lady" in a state of collapse, had so far recovered as to go out with her at seven o'clock in his evening clothes.

That really alarmed me for Theodore, not because I feared Durk's threat, but because I feared Viviette's fascination. I kept telephoning that evening. Theodore came in just before twelve. Without comment I conveyed Durk's threat. There was no fear in Theodore's voice when he answered.

" 'Fools around with my girl,' " he repeated, mouthing the words as if they pleased him. "Was that what he said? Well, I don't believe he'll do it. And I'm going down there to fly again. Somehow, although it frightened me almost to death, I'm rather fascinated by the air."

"That doesn't appear to be the only thing you're fascinated with," I suggested.

"You mean Viviette," he said, and I heard him chuckle. "Well, of course I can't talk about that."

"If you'll take my advice you'll drop all this nonsense and go back to print collecting," I advised him.

"Well, maybe you're right," he said. His voice was hesitant. "But that certainly was a mummified life I was leading. Anyhow, I've got to go down to Mineola to collect that Utamaro. I earned it today."

AND go back to Mineola he did—again and again, although, as well as I could ascertain, he never ventured into the air again. Durk refused peremptorily to sell him the print for a thousand dollars, averring that his proviso had been a stunt flight, not a straight flight.

Nevertheless, he permitted Theodore to stand around his hangar and watch him at his daily round of passenger-carrying. It seemed to gratify his vanity to prod this puny specimen with his coarse wit, and sometimes to order him about in a dominating manner that Theodore found it impossible to resist.

And Theodore grew less and less like the Theodore Silton I had known, the weak-willed man of intellect, and more like a pale copy of the rough, boisterous airman. His interest in affairs of art waned as his enthusiasm for flying waxed; so much was this so that when, occasionally, Morton Durk pressed him with questions concerning the Utamaro, and the other works of the artist, he answered impatiently.

I would have delighted in a more vigorous and more decisive Theodore, but the thing that replaced my friend was not Theodore. The sense of foreboding, of something evil overhanging us, grew more and more pronounced in me.

Never did a woman use her power over a man more than Viviette Chaumont. As she delighted in balking Durk, so she delighted in parading her wealthy catch triumphantly through the lighted places of the city.

And Theodore, displaying a crude cynicism I had never suspected him of possessing, saw much of her, more because it roused anger in Durk than because he was a slave to her fascinations. It was the only way he could revenge himself for Durk's petty cruelties and domineering manner.

One day at Mineola as I watched Theodore, deep in an examination of a dismantled motor, a thought, grotesque, but not beyond consideration in that unreal situation, occurred to me.

I sought Durk's lodgings in a little ivy-wreathed cottage not far from the field. The landlady admitted me when I stated boldly I was sent by the pilot. In Durk's room my eye fell instantly on what I hoped to find—the Utamaro. It was tacked up on the wall among a number of cheap reproductions of Farre's wonderful action paintings of aerial combats.

I took it down and I was about to leave the room, when suddenly I noticed a pile of books tossed on the bed. Inquisitively I picked one up. It was a tome entitled: "Art, its Meaning and Its Message."

I gasped; then I looked through the others. They were all upon such things as etchings, prints and oil and water colors."

I hurried back to the field, my heart beating like a muffled drum.

I put myself to some pains to avoid Morton Durk, and was relieved to catch a glimpse of him sitting in Theodore's car with Viviette. They were apparently deep in an animated

flirtation, as I noted without surprise, for Viviette strove to maintain a hold on men, and Durk was still, in a half-contemptuous way, a slave to her fascinating femininity.

Theodore, within the hangar, was still deep in his study of the motor.

"I've brought you that Utamaro to look at," I said.

He shook his head impatiently.

"Thanks, old scout," he muttered, "drop it over there by my coat, will you? I'll give it a squint later."

"Don't you want to see it? Look!" I thrust the gorgeous print toward him.

He glanced upward without interest. Then, as his eyes took in details of color and skill he suddenly stood upright with blanching face. The carbureter he held clattered to the floor. He glanced around, dazedly, and clutched at the Utamaro as if it were a talisman against evil.

"I—I can't understand what possesses me to come down here," he said fretfully. "Where's the car?"

A heavy step thudded on the cement floor of the hangar and Morton Durk brushed by me. He ripped the Utamaro from Theodore's hand with little regard for its safety, and gave him an angry tap on the chest that made the smaller man stagger backward.

"You little crook!" he snarled. "What ye mean by stealing my print?"

Theodore stammered a denial, and, as I hesitated on the brink of explanation, Viviette followed Durk into the hangar.

"Now what?" she demanded, confronting the airman as savagely as if she had not two minutes before been engaged in clandestine love-making with him. "Are you bullying Theodore again?"

"Bullying him!" retorted Durk. Her sudden change plainly irritated him. "He couldn't stand my bullying; he'd shrivel up if I slapped him."

"He has more spunk than you think," Viviette flamed back at him. "He's a gentleman, and gentlemen always have spunk deep down inside them."

Durk laughed raucously. "Damn deep!" he said, sarcasm sharpening his voice. "The little lapdog has tried to steal my Utamaro. If he wants it let him come up in the air on a stunt flight with me, like I said. A stunt flight and a thousand; that's my price, and it's too high for a—a roach like him."

"He'll call you on that!" Viviette retorted. "You will, won't you, Theodore? Sure he will!"

Theodore, somewhat bewildered, opened his mouth to protest, but Durk had forgotten all about him and his angry eyes saw only Viviette.

"Right!" he replied. "We'll see how much spunk he has. Get on that flying suit, you Silton!"

Theodore, under the threatening eye of Durk, was hustled into air togs while I stood by, realizing it was futile to intervene now. Viviette, still flaming with rage, cinched his helmet under his chin. Durk broke into a rapid patter of advice not calculated to embolden a novice.

"Whatever you do, don't walk out on the tail of the ship," he cautioned. "The last man who did that in my bus stubbed his toe. He starved to death on the way down. If we burst into flames at least we won't be crushed to death. Don't open your mouth too wide when I do a dive, or the wind will blow your head off."

I did contrive to say a word to Durk while eager mechanics, attracted to the scene, hoisted Theodore into the rear cockpit.

"I hope you won't be too hard on him," I said. "Remember he's a nervous, quiet young man not used to anything strenuous."

DURK smiled. It was a smile that showed too much of his teeth.

"There's a dual control system in this ship," he replied. "If little Theodore don't like the way I handle her I'll let him fly her himself to show his spunk. Spunk! Why, I order him about like a guttersnipe and he obeys. Spunk! Hell!"

Disdaining the foot rests, he vaulted easily into his seat.

"You may find that Viviette is right," I answered, angered in my turn by his snarling contempt. "There sometimes is spunk—deep down."

He laughed scornfully.

"We'll see," he said. "And I'll promise you what I told him that first day he butted in. I'll land him in one piece. Don't worry. I've broken bones and records in this game, but never my word. Fasten his belt back there! Switch off!"

I turned to look at Theodore. That part of his face not shrouded by helmet and goggles was gray. His gloved hands clutched the frame, and he stared glassily forward at the pilot's head. To him the reality of life and death was terribly plain.

At Durk's crisp "Contact!" a big mechanic gingerly grasped the edge of the propeller into flickering invisibility. With a derisive lift of the hand to Viviette, Durk sent his plane speeding across the greensward and then fairly dived upward into the air.

To smother my forebodings, I joined Durk's mechanics in front of the hangar. The gray plane mounted into the sky in great circles at a speed that brought forth admiring comment. Even I could appreciate the sureness of Durk's control over his machine.

"Five thousand feet," said a tall, dungaree-clad youth beside me, as he surveyed the plane, now small and black. "'Bout time he started to show your friend the works. There he goes! Loop!"

The plane had dived suddenly earthward. As its speed increased terrifically it came level for an instant, then soared upward again and fell gracefully over onto its back.

"No loop—upside-down stuff," the mechanic corrected himself. "He can handle a ship head down, hanging by his belt, as well as other pilots can fly level."

I watched the maneuver, intently fascinated by the thought of what Theodore's feelings must be at this instant, a mile from earth, helpless in the hands of a man who had never felt fear in all his reckless, adventurous career.

A tiny dot, a mere speck against the blue heaven separated itself from the overturned plane. It plunged downward.

I surveyed it casually, wondering what it was. Perhaps a coat or a robe of some sort. A sharp oath from the man beside me suddenly set my heart contracting and my blood running like an icy trickle through my veins.

"God! His belt broke!"

The little dot resolved itself into a sprawling figure, doomed, but still madly clutching at the air.

"Who?" I managed to gasp.

"Don't know!"

I became conscious of the girl Viviette moaning behind me.

"Oh! It might 'a' been me! It might 'a' been me!" she kept repeating.

The plane, too, was hurtling downward, with spinning nose toward earth and tail revolving giddily. But though it dropped at dreadful speed it could not fall as fast as the man.

SUDDENLY a wild roar arose from the mechanics beside me. My gaze leaped back to the doomed, plunging body. The man had ceased to struggle; he had drawn himself straight and rigid. For an instant we beheld that fine, defiant gesture. Then——

"Grit!" muttered the young me-

chanic, and wiped drops of perspiration from his forehead with a hand that trembled.

But while those beside me still wondered who it was that, far out on the field, had crashed to his end so gallantly, I knew. That splendid unconcern when hope was gone and death only a second away was the attitude of a gentleman—a man of intellect and of rare spirit at bottom.

It was with such insouciance that the idle and worthless nobility of France went to the guillotine. I knew Durk would have fought death to the end without fear, for he was devoid of fear, but such a gesture as that was beyond him. It would not occur to him.

With an aching heart I looked upward at the plane, which was still falling rapidly. Even as my eyes encountered it the rapid whirl of the tail diminished. Then it ceased. The headlong dive became a less steep descent. The plane an instant later was flying level.

"Snappy work!" muttered the mechanic. "Nobody but Durk can come out of a fast spin that quick."

I made a step forward, toward the body that lay somewhere on the other side of the field, but found my shaking limbs would not uphold me. Weakly I leaned back against the hangar and as I did so the plane above tilted and spiraled downward.

A few hundred feet above us the machine leveled off once more. Then abruptly it glided sideways toward earth. Down it slipped, one wing pointing to the ground.

I uttered an exclamation, for the machine seemed on the verge of a crash that would make the tragedy a double one. But the mechanic reassured me.

"That's just Durk's sideslip," he explained. "He always kills his speed and altitude that way."

The plane confirmed his words, for, in response to a master hand, it suddenly straightened out, inches above the field. It skimmed along, a bare foot over the ground. Gently, almost imperceptibly, its wheels touched the grass. Then it came jouncing along the plain toward us.

I watched, and then, with an eerie feeling that was half horror and half incredulity, I saw. The front seat was empty. The man in the rear cockpit was Theodore Silton. Even as I perceived that it was he my scalp prickled and my hands shook.

For though it was Theodore, I found nothing familiar in the expression of the alert, straight-lipped face beneath the helmet. The thing called spirit in that hooded figure so intent on steering the plane into position on the line seemed utterly alien to the body.

The uncanniness of that purposeful face, the weird certainty with which those slender white fingers stretched toward the ignition switch as the machine swept into place, turned me cold.

The roar of the motor ceased. Unsnapping his safety belt, the man sprang out of the plane. Then, abruptly, his grim, set face turned ashen and relaxed into the weak, familiar features that I knew. His eyes, bewildered, questioning, fell upon the plane he had just left. With a quavering cry, he fell fainting, face downward upon the ground.

And in my ears, like the thunder of a great organ, the words of Morton Durk reverberated:

"My word's good here or in heaven or hell!"

Who was it that brought Theodore Silton safe to earth? And who was it that gave to Morton Durk the impulse to die like a thoroughbred though he had lived like a brute?

The facts are yours for the reading, but you must furnish your own explanation.

The Most Mysterious Happening in My Life

As related by ETHEL BARRYMORE

to

BIDE DUDLEY

ETHEL BARRYMORE, possibly America's best known actress, was in the living-room of her apartment in West 59th Street, New York, when I dropped in for a brief visit recently. Greeting me pleasantly, she asked me to be seated. She had been apprised of the object of my call before I arrived.

"Am I to understand," she said, "that you are seeking the greatest mystery I ever encountered?"

"You are, Miss Barrymore," I replied.

"I'm afraid you're doomed to disappointment," she continued, smiling. "Mystery hasn't bothered me much. Like Houdini, I believe everything that seems uncanny can be explained if one knows how to work out its puzzling features. The greatest mystery to me is how some people can believe there are mysteries that are supernatural.

"You have probably gathered, by this time, that I am of rather a practical turn of mind. Even death is no mystery to me. It is merely the running down of the clock—the wearing out of the machine.

"Now, do you realize what sort of a person you are asking to find a great mystery in her life?"

"But," I argued, "to the practical mind the unexplained incident should be even more of a mystery than to others who may stand in awe of such things. Surely you must have in memory some unusual experience for which no explanation ever was found. Isn't there one?"

Miss Barrymore hesitated; then she nodded.

"Yes," she replied, "there was one. But it was more or less trivial—at least, so it seemed to me. There was no supernatural angle to it. I shall admit it did cause me to wonder for a while. Lately, however, I haven't given it a thought, so I couldn't have regarded it as important, could I?"

"No mystery would be important to you with your practical way of looking at things," I returned. "But let me hear about this one, won't you?"

"It concerns telegraphy," Miss Barrymore said. "Of course, I know nothing of the dot and dash language. If I understood it, there would be no mystery, so called or otherwise. I would have cleared it up myself, without delay."

"I used to telegraph," I said, interrupting. "I understand the wire language perfectly. Perhaps I can help you solve your puzzle."

"That's a wonderful idea," she continued. "But naturally you must first hear my story. I was acting, on tour, in a play where a telegraph instrument was used. It was a number of years ago. On the stage in one act we had a receiving instrument that ticked, the idea being that it was supposed to be spelling out a real message. The key, if that's what you call it, was behind the scenes and a stagehand used to tap it, thereby making the sounder click. The clatter meant n o t h i n g, of course.

"One day a man, I believe he was a dramatic reviewer in a Middle Western city, asked if the sounder really was spelling out anything. On receiving a negative answer, he suggested that, out of respect for detail, we should have a real telegrapher in the wings to send a real message.

" 'There may be Morse operators in the audience,' he said. 'Why not give them the real thing?'

"His suggestion found favor with the manager and was adopted. A young man, who could telegraph, was engaged. Besides his work at the key he acted a 'bit' in the play. At each performance he sent a message which, he said, was according to the manuscript. We took his word for it, since we had no way of telling what words he was ticking off. Things went along all right for a fortnight; then I received a surprise. A letter came to me from a city which we had visited.

" 'My dear Miss Barrymore,' it said, 'I wonder if you know what that telegraph instrument in your play said about you the night I was in the audience. I heard it. You should find out and see that it isn't repeated.

" '73'—An Operator.'

"I showed the letter to the actor-operator. He laughed.

" 'A joke,' he said. 'I'm sending only the prescribed message. Why should I send anything else, and particularly about you?'

" 'I don't know,' I replied. 'But what does "73" mean?'

" 'It means *Best Wishes.*'

"HE seemed so frankly honest about it that I tore up the letter and forgot it. Two weeks later a second letter reached me from another telegrapher. This one read:

" 'Dear Miss Barrymore, that telegraph sounder is talking about you in your play. You should have the s e n d e r reprimanded. Operators, who may be in your audiences, are certain to be surprised. Yours truly, J. K. Blake, a brass-pounder.'

"Again I took the actor-operator to task. He vowed he was sending only the message called for in the play's manuscript. Once more he was so sincere, apparently, that I let his protestations convince me he was doing no wrong. The matter was dropped again.

"Finally, however, a telegrapher in a railroad station, who had seen the play the preceding night, told me, when I went to him to send a wire to New York, that the telegraph instrument had *talked* about me.

"He apologized for addressing me at all, but said he thought I ought to know somebody was tricking me. I asked what the sounder had said, but he merely grinned and declined to tell. I insisted, but to no avail.

" 'The man working that key must be crazy,' he said. 'He isn't really harming you, but his Morse chatter is silly.'

"Thoroughly aroused, I sought the actor-operator.

" 'Now, look here!' I said firmly. 'You're sending something over that telegraph set that is about me, and it's very silly. Don't deny it. I know you are, because several tele-

graphers have told me so. What have you been saying?'

"'Did any of them tell you?' he asked.

"'No!'

"'If they had told you I was saying anything about you, they would have been lying. My dear Miss Barrymore, you are the last person in the world I'd try to make appear silly. Really, I mean it, and I sincerely hope you won't listen to those crazy fools who are telling you I am sending anything other than the regular message. I like you too much to make you appear foolish.'

"'Don't be silly!' I snapped. 'You're not telling the truth. I'll give you one chance—right now—to do so. If you don't, I'll see that you quit this company.'

"He reiterated his protest of innocence. I hated to do it, but I had to have him discharged. He asked if he might be retained merely to act his *bit*, but I insisted he get out. I was incensed. I had to believe his lying. What else could I think?"

"There was nothing else to think," I replied. "Undoubtedly he was lying."

"Of course! So we dropped him and the telegraph instrument went back to its inexpert clatter. After that I had no more disturbing notes or verbal warnings from operators."

"And do you mean to say you never became curious about what that fellow had been sending?" I asked.

"Oh, for a while I wondered," Miss Barrymore continued. "But I soon forgot about it. I considered the incident closed, but it wasn't.

"We finished our tour and returned to New York. One day I received a yellow letter from the actor-operator. It was forwarded to me from the office of my manager. It said the writer was ill in a hospital in Omaha and that the doctors had given him just thirty-six hours to live. Feeling his end near he wanted to confess to me he had not told the truth about what he sent over the telegraph instruments.

"'I did mention you nightly in my message,' said the letter, 'but I didn't expect anybody to read the sounder. I was merely giving play to my own thoughts. I feel you would like to know what the message I sent really was, so I am enclosing it herewith. However, it is in the Morse code—the language of dots and dashes.

"'Get some telegrapher to decipher it for you. When you hear it translated please believe every word is true, so far as my feelings for you are concerned. Forgive me, Miss Barrymore. I who am about to die salute you.'

"The dot and dash note, done in pencil, was enclosed. Curiosity came to me with a rush. I was eager to know what it said. So I went to a telegraph office and showed it to an operator.

"'PLEASE,' I said, beaming on him, 'tell me what this rubbish means. I am most anxious to know.'

"He studied it a moment and laughed.

"'It's evidently the ravings of a disordered brain,' he finally replied. 'I don't think you should know what it says. It isn't uncomplimentary in any way, and yet it might worry you. No, my dear Miss Barrymore—I see your name in the dots and dashes—I must refuse to translate it. Take the note home; burn it up and forget it.'

"Now I was more curious than ever. I urged him to tell me what it said, but he was smilingly firm in his stand.

"'I couldn't give you a literal translation,' he said.

"He was called back to his work at that point. I went home and

dropped the note in an old trunk. It's been there something like eight years."

"Queer!" I mused. Then I asked: "Did the actor-operator die?"

"I don't know," replied Miss Barrymore. "I never heard from him again." She hesitated. "Did you say you understand telegraphy?"

"I do. In fact, I made telegraphy my means of earning a livelihood for six years."

"What would you do if I were to show you that dot and dash note?"

"What would you want me to do?"

"Translate it."

"Then I'd do it."

"You really would?"

"I would."

"Oh, Clara!" called Miss Barrymore. A maid appeared. "Go down in the storeroom and get that yellow letter out of my old leather trunk. It's in the tray."

The maid procured a bunch of keys and left the apartment. She returned in about ten minutes and handed the actress the letter. Miss Barrymore turned it over to me.

"Please—please translate it," she said.

I studied the dots and dashes a moment. Then I read:

"Ethel Barrymore is a very attractive young woman. She has a smile that lights up my heart. I'd like to be her friend."

"There you are," I said, tearing the dot and dash note into little bits and tossing them into a fireplace. "Now you know all about it."

Miss Barrymore studied me a moment in wonder. She did not speak. I arose.

"Well, I must be going along," I said. "Thanks very much for the story. It's quite a mystery tale, after all, isn't it?"

"I—I suppose so," she replied, still gazing at me searchingly.

"Good-by, Miss Barrymore!" I said at the door. I extended my hand; she took it.

"Good-by!" she returned, still apparently in a state of wonder. I started away. The elevator was waiting.

"Oh, Mr. Dudley—just a moment!" she called. Already I had stepped into the car. The elevator boy waited. "Did you tell me the truth about that dot and dash note—honestly, did you?"

I was a bit embarrassed; I hesitated.

"Tell me—did you?" she pleaded.

"No," I replied, as I motioned to the elevator boy to start. "Miss Barrymore, I lied."

And that was exactly what I had done.

The sixth story of the series will be told by

LENORE ULRIC

It will appear in our next issue, out April 15

PLEASE REMEMBER

MYSTERY MAGAZINE is published *twice a month*—on the first and fifteenth.

A Bon Marché

By WILLIAM MERRIAM ROUSE

A LIGHTED window is a friendly thing. At the edge of night, when the pack straps are beginning to cut into the shoulders and the tump-line has become a dull ache across one's forehead, a lighted window is a benediction.

To Jean-Baptiste Langlais, of the Quebec forestry service, the bright yellow square meant victory over the cold that was beginning to seep through wool and sheepskin. It meant hot beans and tea and a chance to sleep under a roof.

The light struck out across the snow; the odor of wood smoke hung upon the still air. Langlais was young, and as tough as hickory, but he was glad that he would not have to make camp this night under the stars.

Here would be a couple of honest, simple choppers, for this was a small cabin, and they would make him welcome.

He was done with people of the city; had not his heart been broken by a girl named Félicie who lived in the Rue St. Louis, in Quebec?

He congratulated himself that he had the department to send him out here into the vast Laurentian forests, where the thin population was nine-tenths men and dogs.

Jean-Baptiste kicked off his snowshoes and set them on end in a drift that reached nearly to the eaves of the cabin. He shifted his rifle to the crook of his left arm and knocked as was required by good form, although it was equally good form for him to pull up the wooden latch and step into the room without waiting for a response.

The first emotion of Langlais, as he swept the interior of the cabin with a glance, was that he was not going to be met by that hot supper which he had expected.

Then this disappointment was forgotten in the swift impression that there was something very strange about the fat man by the stove and the huddled figure in the corner, which was unmistakably that of a girl.

A girl! *Parbleu!* Had he not already had enough of them?

The fat man sat calmly enough by the square, sheet-iron stove; but there was nothing cooking there and it was quite apparent that this person, whose chin hung in folds upon his homespun shirt, was more concerned with watching the girl and the door through which Langlais had entered than in eating.

A rifle lay across his enormous legs. The padded fingers of one hand clasped the lock and in the small eyes which cocked themselves up ludicrously at Jean-Baptiste there was no welcome.

"*Bon soir!*" said Langlais, halting uncertainly. "Good evening, *monsieur* and *mademoiselle!* I hope I do not intrude?"

In the bush a stranger must be made at least outwardly welcome. It would have been not only hostile but provocative of battle, for all the fat man knew, to tell Langlais to get out. Moreover, it was apparent that the cabin did not belong to him.

Upon the log walls hung no dishes. The two bunks were empty of blankets, and a pile of packs in a corner told that the fat one and whoever might be with him had no more right here than Jean-Baptiste Langlais.

"*Monsieur,*" said the man by the stove, "if you will sit down on that bench near the door, and kick the girl in the shins if she tries to get out, I shall be so grateful that I shall not care whether you intrude or not! Already she has scratched me! She has struck me! With two of us it will be easier."

All this he said in a tone of calm disgust, as though it were the most natural thing in the world to ask a stranger to kick a girl's shins. And although this fat fellow spoke the patois of the bush, Langlais perceived that he had to deal with a man of humor and of intelligence.

He smiled amiably, and let his pack down to the exceedingly dirty floor.

Then Jean-Baptiste unbuttoned his coat and took off his *casque* of sealskin, revealing thick hair that gleamed with a coppery sheen in the light of the candles stuck in their own grease upon a shelf.

LANGLAIS looked at the girl, who had not moved from her seat in the farthest corner. She met his gaze with fierce black eyes. She glared at him from under a tangle of black curls. A little face, rose and white with the complexion which the north gives to the Canadienne; a little, almost childish form, in clothing obviously better than that which a wood chopper's daughter might be expected to wear.

Jean-Baptiste scented a situation out of the ordinary, but because of the calm assurance of the fat man he did not at the moment suspect anything sinister.

"A little something to eat is more to me than anything else just now," said Langlais. "Nevertheless I'll agree to stop *mademoiselle* if she tries to go out. Is that enough?"

"*Mon Dieu!* Yes! Perhaps now I can get a chance to eat something myself! *Salut, monsieur!*"

He whipped a bottle of whisky *blanc* from his pocket and let a good half pint run down his throat before he restored that bottle to the pocket, very carefully.

"I do not offer you any, because this is all I have. *Bon Dieu!* I am a man who needs whisky! And tonight! With a woman on my hands!"

Langlais shrugged, with a twinkle in his gray eyes at the bland and unashamed of selfishness of that mountain of flesh beside the stove.

Jean-Baptiste was already eating ravenously from his pack, bread and cold pork and seldom had food tasted too good to him. In a few minutes he would make a pan of hot tea, and then the good pipe!

Now the man of the cabin, apparently no longer suspicious of Langlais, set his rifle against the wall and brought out food from his own pockets.

He chewed loudly, with an occasional sidelong glance and a growl toward the girl.

Her lip curled as she watched him. Suddenly she threw back her head and laughed, with no sound of mirth.

"Perhaps," suggested Jean-Baptiste, "*mademoiselle* would like something to eat?"

"Eat?" exclaimed the fat man, with his mouth full. "She has tried to eat me, Adolphe Tetu, who weighs two hundred and forty pounds! Women ought not to eat! I am against it!"

Nevertheless he got up and lumbered across the room toward her, holding out a piece of crusty bread. With a lightning-like blow of her small hand she knocked the bread to the floor!

"Do you see?" exclaimed Tetu,

grunting as he bent to recover the crust. "She has a devil, *monsieur!* I do not know your name?"

"Langlais," he chuckled. "Women are a great trouble to us, my friend!"

"Always," agreed Tetu, with conviction, as he returned to his bench and began to munch the bread which he had recovered from the floor.

The eyes, sunken in little hillocks of fat, seemed to Langlais to be filled with speculation as they regarded him.

Now to say that Jean-Baptiste was not somewhat curious would be untrue, but since the girl was as hostile to him as she was to Adolphe Tetu, he felt neither duty nor inclination to make impertinent inquiries.

Although she was as plainly superior to this gross fellow it was some family affair, Langlais thought, and they were on their way south to some of the villages. At least he had not seen their tracks as he headed north that day.

"M. Langlais," said Tetu, at the end of a long silence.

He wiped crumbs from his mouth and took another pull at the bottle.

"You are not, by any chance, very religious?"

"I have not been accused of it!" laughed Jean-Baptiste. "Are you?"

"Bon!" ejaculated Tetu, with satisfaction. "The answer is enough! I am going to offer you a bargain!"

"I am not in a mood to trade," replied Langlais, coldly.

He was more than a little annoyed with himself because his eyes would persist in turning toward that curly black head which now leaned back against a log and regarded him with veiled scorn. He was through with all women. Had he not promised himself that? And, moreover, this was no time for him to look with interest upon a girl.

"I, Adolphe Tetu, will sell you that girl very cheaply!"

"What?" cried Langlais, roused by astonishment. "Are you mad?"

"Perhaps, but that has nothing to do with it," replied Tetu. "Look at her, monsieur! She is beautiful, and she is a bargain at fifty dollars! Surely a man like you, who wears a *casque* of sealskin and carries a good rifle, must have that much money with him!"

"Mon Dieu!" breathed Jean-Baptiste. He looked at the girl. Not a muscle of her face had changed. "Girls are not bought and sold in the Province of Quebec; not even here in the wilderness! You are joking, and it is a dangerous joke!"

"You lack sense!" Tetu wagged his head. "Anything can be done here and now! Consequences are another matter! If you do not buy this girl and take her away both you and she will be very sorry! I shall wash my hands of both of you!"

"What do you mean?" asked Langlais, and now he caught the feeling that he had stumbled upon something serious.

"Black Nicolas and the Muskrat have gone looking for a cabin where they think we can get some more food and *whisky blanc*," said Tetu, folding his hands upon his fat stomach. "They will come back in a short time. Now I have merely boxed this girl's ears. They will kill her, without doubt, but not immediately, *monsieur!* They will also kill you at once. But that is not of much consequence.

"This girl will be traced to us and we may all hang at Quebec. That is why I should like to sell her to you. They'll curse me a little, but they will share the fifty dollars; and we'll take a drink, and that will be the end of it!"

IT seemed incredible to Jean-Baptiste that the man before him was speaking the truth; and yet such

things had happened. A gang of cutthroats, and this cautious one wished to get out of a situation which might cause great trouble for them.

"You g u a r d e d her carefully enough when I came," said Langlais, "and now you want to get rid of her! Bah! You want to get fifty dollars out of my pocket! By the looks and the silence of *mademoiselle* she'll be as willing to bite and scratch me as anyone else!"

"Look here!"

Adolphe Tetu took a few swallows of inspiration from his bottle and drew a hand across his mouth.

"I am a man of good sense, and also of caution. You are not of the police! I will tell you the truth, for you look like a good fellow, *un bon camerade.* Moreover, you want this girl! I can see it in your eye! Yes, she looks very good to you!"

Tetu paused, and the creases of fat in his face stretched themselves into a grin.

Langlais felt as though he might be blushing, and he permitted his head to turn somewhat anxiously toward the girl. She drew back a little farther into her corner but the fierce courage of her eyes remained undaunted.

"Eh bien!" continued Tetu, well satisfied with himself. "This is what happened. The Muskrat, Black Nicolas and I made a habitant near St. Anselm dig up his stocking of money, and a fat one it was! Good enough! A fine night's work! But those two fools, Nicolas and the Muskrat, were very drunk and they are always reckless.

"We met this girl in the road and when they saw how pretty she was nothing would do but that they must tie a scarf over her mouth and bring her along! *Mon Dieu!* Did I not beg them, with tears, to remember that women are of the devil?

"Now I have found out from her that she is Fanchon Millette, daughter of the mayor of St. Anselm! To rob a habitant is one thing and to steal the daughter of the mayor of a village is another! There will be a fine mess about this! We can't let her go! So Black Nicolas has decided to put her out of the way, later on!

"So far we have been traveling fast, with no time for girls. Now, me, I am a man of wisdom. My neck is too fat for a rope. *Parbleu!* If I sell this girl, unharmed, we are more or less clear, and if they ever catch you, or find her, it will be nothing for me to worry about!"

The long speech ended, and Adolphe Tetu finished his bottle and smashed it against the wall. He was in fine humor by now. Jean-Baptiste, staring at him, realized that Tetu knew he was going to buy the girl. No doubt she knew it, too. No need to explain to this bandit that he intended to take her safely home.

Inwardly he cursed his luck. A trip spoiled; explanations to make to the department. The girl must be saved; and certainly she was beautiful, even to a man whose heart had been recently broken.

"I will buy," said Langlais, quietly, reaching inside his jacket. "Moreover, I will show you that fifty dollars is nearly all I have with me, so you will not be tempted to rob me!"

"Monsieur!" cried Tetu joyously. "I am so happy to get rid of that girl that I would almost give you money to take her!"

In two minutes Langlais was belting in his sheepskin lined *capote* and slipping his arms through the straps of his pack. He was refreshed a little by food and warmth and rest and, after all, the excitement of the adventure was something. So it was not exactly in bad humor that he turned to the girl.

"Mlle. Millette," he said, politely,

"if you are ready, we will start before these others come back!"

"Ha!" chuckled Tetu, from his bench. "The man speaks with politeness now, but wait until he finds her out!"

Jean-Baptiste experienced a slight sinking within, as the girl began to move with deliberation. She pulled a red knitted *tuque* down over her curls and drew on fur mittens. Then she crossed the room and with a glance like a darting sword blade at Langlais stepped out into the starlit night.

She took her snowshoes from those beside the door and Jean-Baptiste, as a matter of habit, dropped to one knee to put her feet into the harness.

Suddenly he saw stars which were not in the dark vault above. He sprawled upon his back, clutching at the snow, with the consciousness that he had been jarred from head to foot by a blow of no inconsiderable force.

Mlle. Fanchon Millette had kicked him in the neck, slipped her feet into the harness, and was already going south. A roar of laughter came from the cabin as Langlais scrambled to his feet and started after the girl.

"A pleasant evening, monsieur!" called Tetu. "Goodby and good luck, which you won't have!"

LANGLAIS caught up with her, of course, at the end of a hundred yards, although she went as fast as she could march. He caught hold of her arm and the other mittened hand swung for his eyes. Except that he was remarkably quick of movement he might have suffered.

"What do you mean?" he cried. "Don't you understand, *mademoiselle*, that I am trying to help you?"

"Help me!" she echoed, panting in his grasp. "You are no better than the others! They, at least, would have killed me! Bah! You buy me and talk of help! Can I not read your evil face? But I shall make you kill me, or I shall kill you!"

He let go of her wrists and she staggered away. Now Jean-Baptiste was angry. He forgot what his attitude must have seemed from the girl's corner in the cabin. He had said nothing about taking her home in front of Tetu.

"You ought to be beaten!" he said. "March ahead of me!"

Jean-Baptiste was ashamed of himself, but he was none the less angry. She might at least have looked up at him with admiration and sentiment, and a whisper of thanks from those very attractive lips. Not that he cared, any longer, about women; but this girl was exceedingly something or other that made a man want to kiss her and box her ears. Yes, there was a certain distinction and charm about the way in which she swung ahead of him through the white night.

Bien! He would show her that he also could be haughty. It was his plan to stop for the night at an empty choppers' cabin which he had passed about two hours' march back along the trail. He would feed her. She could have his blankets. But he would endeavor to let her know with unmistakable plainness that she had mistreated one who had saved her life.

They went through those two hours in silence and the girl stopped when they reached the little cabin, huddling under a mound of snow, as though she had divined his purpose.

Langlais put his shoulder against the door, sagging from long disuse, and forced it open. After waiting a moment to make sure that no animal had decided to live there, he opened his pack and got out candles and matches.

The building was only a little better than no shelter at all. The hand-

hewn planks of the floor were rotten and broken and in two or three places patches of stars were visible through holes in the roof.

However, there was a fireplace and a bunk at each end of the room. Langlais made a fire and propped up the inevitable shelf-table. He put out such food as he had and began to melt snow for tea.

"There, *mademoiselle,*" he said, coldly, "you may eat, if you wish!"

She had been watching him from one of the bunks, with a frown.

Suddenly a smile broke over her face and Jean-Baptiste experienced a certain dancing of the heart, such as had once been occasioned by a girl named Félicie, of the Rue St. Louis, in Quebec.

Bon Dieu! This Franchon Millette was really beautiful!

"Perhaps, *monsieur,*" she said, with a note in her voice that was almost caressing, "perhaps I may eat something."

"That's better!" he exclaimed, smiling. "We are not such enemies, after all!"

"Ah, no!" She came and sat down upon a block of wood beside the shelf. "If *monsieur* would let me take his hunting knife?"

"But yes!" And out of its sheath Jean-Baptiste whipped his knife, and presented it to her with the point toward him.

That quick politeness very nearly cost him his life, for in the same instant that her fingers closed around the hilt she lunged. The point was within a foot of the stomach of Jean-Baptiste Langlais and during a very small part of a second he believed that he was going to dine upon steel instead of bread and cold pork. Then her wrist was twisted back and the knife dropped.

"For that," said Langlais, a bit shakily, "you'll eat with your finers!"

"I will eat with my fingers," she told him, in a low voice, "in order to get strength to kill you! I hate you more than I did those beasts, because you should be a gentleman!"

"Will nothing convince you that I am not going to do you any harm?" cried Jean-Baptiste.

"What else can I think? You bought me as though I were a—a cow! And for fifty dollars! Oh, *mon Dieu Seigneur!* A paltry fifty dollars! You should have shot him, of course! You have no romance and you are a villain! Either one alone I might forgive, but the two together! I hate you! *Misérable!*"

"Women!" Jean-Baptiste hurled the word down at her, folding his arms. "You are all alike! You would have me shoot a perfectly amiable scoundrel for nothing!"

"For nothing! Do you call me nothing? Thank you very much for the compliment, *monsieur!*"

"No!" roared Langlais. "You are not nothing! You are a great deal of trouble! Cheap, he said! It is to laugh!"

"Ah! I am a trouble! Let's see how innocent of bad intentions you are. Let me go now!"

"What? Alone into the woods? No food, rifle, blankets? Without knowing which direction to take?"

"Ha!" she triumphed. "I knew you did not mean it! You keep me prisoner!"

"The girl is mad!" groaned Langlais. "But they are all mad!"

"I am at least not a cow!" Her black eyes snapped. "Although you bought me like one!"

"No, you are not a cow! You have a devil, as that amusing and very wise Tetu said!"

THEY were so absorbed in their battle that neither had heard any warning sound from without. The first intimation of danger that Lang-

lais had was when the small red mouth of Fanchon, opened to say more disagreeable things to him, suddenly formed a scream. He swung around instantly, turning back toward the table and facing the door as the only direction from which harm could come.

If it had not been for her involuntary scream he would have been caught completely at the mercy of the two men who had entered the cabin; struck between the shoulder blades with the knife which the foremost of them had raised for the blow.

They were a pair of evil-looking beasts, these two, and Langlais knew as well as he could without a formal introduction that they were the comrades of Adolphe Tetu. The one with the uplifted knife had blue-black hair and whiskers, and the man at his elbow was a chunky fellow with a pointed, rodent face.

In that first glance Jean-Baptiste took stock of the situation. His rifle was out of reach in a corner, but if these two had brought their rifles they had left them outside. So in that respect he stood even.

However, the odds were two to one; and it was not to be doubted that these men knew how to handle their knives. He caught his own up from the table where it had fallen and parried and thrust just as Black Nicolas came at him.

That first encounter seemed absurdly easy. Nicolas coughed and fell against him, with his black beard suddenly jammed against the shoulder of Jean-Baptiste. Langlais shoved him off and sprang away before the Muskrat could get in close. Nicolas was on the floor bleeding and helpless, and only the less formidable looking of the two was left.

It was here that Jean-Baptiste miscalculated, and his bad judgment very nearly cost him his life in the first ten seconds of his fight with the Muskrat. That one was as quick as a rat, and as deadly.

Backward across the cabin he drove Langlais, who found himself able to do nothing more than keep off that point of steel which seemed to dart at him from three sides at once.

He was in a corner before he realized what was happening, with his chance for footwork gone. The Muskrat, with shoulder humped and beady eyes gleaming, pressed in to finish it. Their blades locked and that of Jean-Baptiste flew out into the middle of the room. He caught the wrist of the Muskrat and found him as strong as a bear; twice as heavy as one would have thought to look at him.

Langlais went down to one knee. The Muskrat shifted his knife to his free hand, and Jean-Baptiste, still fighting, had started to mutter a prayer, when out of the corner of his eye he saw a heavy, three-legged stool within reach. At the end one risks everything without hesitation. Jean-Baptiste grabbed for that stool and swung it, careless of the knife.

The next instant he was free and the Muskrat was reeling backward, with dark blood running from a gash over one eye. He fell to his hands and knees as Langlais leaped for him. Then luck turned again.

Jean-Baptiste was jerked forward, with the most excruciating pain he had ever felt shooting upward from his knee. The room went dark for a moment as he rolled upon the floor with one leg imprisoned where it had gone through a rotten plank.

The pain faded somewhat and Jean-Baptiste could see again. He saw the Muskrat coming toward him on all fours, half blinded by blood. He moved slowly, but with strength,

and his nose was pointed toward a knife that lay between them upon the littered planks. Langlais reached out, but his arm fell inches short of the knife. The torture of trying to reach farther made him faint and dizzy again.

DEATH came lumbering on. The Muskrat had a yard to go to the knife, but he could make it. His eye glittered upon Jean-Baptiste, and he snarled. Then, when Langlais for the second time gave up hope, a small white hand flashed between the two men, and the knife was in the grasp of Fanchon Millette. She stood clear of the arm with which the Muskrat tried to seize her, and she laughed.

"Lie still like your friend under the table," she said in a steady voice, "or presently M. Langlais will make you lie very still indeed!"

"*Dieu!*" breathed Jean-Baptiste, as he turned his attention to the pinioned leg. "I believe that girl likes a fight!"

"I told you!" exclaimed a thick voice from the doorway. Fanchon whirled and Jean-Baptiste turned as well as he could. And there they saw the broad-waisted form and the aggrieved face of Adolphe Tetu.

"They never listen to me!" he said, wagging his fat jowls from side to side as he came into the room. "I told those two fools not to follow the girl! Now look at them! After I have piously helped to bandage them I shall be able to take their money and whisky *blanc* and go in peace. I was a wise man to sell that girl when I did!"

"Scoundrel!" said Fanchon coldly.

"I warn you, my friend!" exclaimed Tetu, and he sat down to take a drink from a fresh bottle. "Ah, you have your leg free! Well, you are free now to get into more trouble with that girl!"

They pushed on that same night, Fanchon Millette and Jean-Baptiste Langlais, in spite of fatigue; and when they were clear of the cabin where the notable Tetu stayed with his whisky *blanc* and his comrades, Langlais asked a question which had been trying to take possession of his tongue ever since the battle.

"Why," he asked, looking down at the girl as she walked beside him, "did you pick up the knife? You could have me killed very easily, and that would have made you happy!"

"I picked up the knife," replied Fanchon, "because I wanted you to live to regret having called me a cow!"

"I never called you a cow!" cried Jean-Baptiste. "That is like a woman!"

"You know nothing about women!" replied Fanchon firmly. "You have it all to learn!"

"Then I shall learn it!"

"I hope so, Monsieur Jean!"

"And I also, Fanchon!"

Sinister House

By CHARLES G. BOOTH

A FOUR PART STORY—PART II

WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED

GAIL HOLLISTER, assistant in the Westcoast Museum, Los Angeles, is on her way to Colonel Conniston's house, Casa de Ayer, to undertake the work of cataloging the Colonel's famous collection of intaglios, when she intercepts the hold-up of John Gill and his son, Victor, prominent Los Angeles dealers in diamonds and precious gems. They are returning from a visit to Colonel Conniston, after making him an offer for his most famous intaglios.

The "highwayman" is Kerry O'Neil, whom Gail has known through her connection with the Westcoast Museum.. He disappears the moment Gail arrives on the scene, but his attempted hold-up of the Gills is as surprising to Gail as it is mysterious.

When she finally reaches Casa de Ayer, and meets the Colonel, he shows her his collection of intaglios; but later, still thinking of the hold-up and of Kerry O'Neil, she is unable to sleep, and standing at her window, she sees someone slinking suspiciously about the grounds. She goes downstairs, with a premonition of dread, and finds that the Colonel has been murdered.

Dimity, the houseman, and Mrs. Wessels, the housekeeper, are roused by Gail's exciting discovery, and Dimity at once leaves to notify the authorities.

In Dimity's absence, Kerry O'Neil enters through the door left open by Dimity, and Gail is as puzzled at his presence now as she was at seeing him masked as a highwayman that evening.

O'Neil is a devil-may-care, reckless and apparently desperate man, but Gail is more afraid for his safety than, at this juncture, she likes to think about.

When he cuts the rope that is tied around the dead Colonel's feet, Gail pleads with him to escape. But he waits until the police actually enter the grounds, then gets out through a window, which Gail immediately bolts.

Gail is grilled by the sheriff, especially about the cut rope and the bolted windows and all suspicion directs itself to a murderer whose escape has been undoubtedly made by Gail's assistance.

CHAPTER VI.

CATHEDRAL ROCK.

GAIL went to her room to think. To answer, if she could, the swarm of questions that buzzed in her mind like bees in a hive.

Who was the man she had seen in the moonlight? Assuming that it was Conniston's murderer, how did he get in and out of this sinister house of bolted windows and doors? Had Dimity or Mrs. Wessels let him in? No! Dimity's knowledge of the affair was innocent, whatever else it might be, and Mrs. Wessels was out of the question. Had the safe been opened? Were the intaglios gone? Who had telephoned the sheriff's office at the county seat? And, above all, Kerry O'Neil—was he safe?

But when, some two hours later, there came a knock on the door, Gail was no nearer enlightenment on these matters than when she had come up. With visions of Bartlett waiting outside she went to the door and opened

it. Merely Mrs. Wessels stood there, however.

"'E's come!" the housekeeper whispered.

"Who?" Gail inquired with a smile.

"His 'Ighness!"

"Mr. Stark?"

Mrs. Wessels nodded. "And he wants to see you. Mebbe you'd better come down."

Gail shivered. Had she to go through that dreadful ordeal again?

"All right. Tell them I'm coming."

Mrs. Wessels hesitated. "Keep your eye on His 'Ighness, Miss 'Ollister! He's a tricky one, 'e is!" And having delivered herself thus, Mrs. Wessels rolled on.

Gail entered the library shortly afterward. She saw that the body had been removed to a couch which stood against the wall near the door. Bartlett was sitting in the chair behind the antique table talking to a tall, solidly-built man who stood by the window. He stopped abruptly when he saw Gail. There was no one else in the room.

Norman Stark came toward Gail with his hand out and mirthless smile on his lips. His eyes were gray green in color and arrogant in expression, but they gave a little leap of interest as Gail entered the sunlight which streamed through the window. He was rather handsome in a dark, heavy, sensual way.

"I am sure you are shocked at this terrible affair, Miss Hollister," he said, in his husky voice after he had introduced himself.

Gail nodded sadly. "I met Colonel Conniston for the first time last night, Mr. Stark. I thought him delightful. You are bound to miss him."

"Yes," said Norman Stark, "I am." But there was no feeling in his voice; his expression did not change. "Bartlett here tells me you came down to straighten out my uncle's antiques. Lord knows they need it!" He looked at her curiously. "I suppose you are——"

"Competent?" Gail suggested, a trifle acidly. She had suddenly decided that she didn't like Stark.

"Well, yes," Stark admitted.

"Colonel Conniston seemed to think so. But you may telephone Doctor McEwan if you wish. Or I will go back. I would much rather."

"No, you won't, my girl!" Bartlett cut in grimly. "You'll stop right here until I say you can go!"

Gail flushed. She had expected something like this. However, she respected the deputy's honesty of purpose, much as she feared and disliked him.

She distrusted Stark. There was something false and untrue about him, she told herself. He had neither pity nor affection for the dead man. Merely a cold-blooded self-interest inspired him. She was struck by something vaguely familiar in the heavy set of his shoulders, in his cat-like quickness as he moved across the floor. Gail looked at him keenly, but his face was strange to her. She didn't like the meaning way in which his gray green eyes rested upon her, though.

"I want you to go on with the catalog work," he told her. "We'll go through the museum later."

He said this with an anticipatory air that infuriated Gail. Ugh! She detested him.

"Stark got a long-distance call at his flat in Los Angeles telling him what has happened," Bartlett went on. "He doesn't know who phoned."

"I got the call just after four o'clock," Stark put in. "I started at once."

Gail looked at Bartlett. "At least you can't accuse me of that. There isn't a telephone in the house."

"I don't accuse you of anything, yet," Bartlett snapped. "But I must consider the evidence: A man can-

not pass through a bolted window or door. And they were all bolted! I examined every one of them immediately after Mrs. Wessels took you away. That is the important point. Get around it if you can. But you can't."

"There may be a secret exit of some kind," Gail said faintly.

"Nonsense! I'll be perfectly frank with you, Miss Hollister. I don' believe you or Mrs. Wessels or Dimity actually killed Conniston, but I do believe one of you let in the man who did, and let him out again. And I suspect you more than the other two because Mrs. Wessels isn't the type for that sort of thing and Dimity is half-baked."

"You have forgotten the man I saw in the moonlight!"

"Oh, you probably saw a man, all right! The man you let in."

"And the motive for all this?" Gail inquired calmly.

"The intaglios, of course. Three hundred thousand in gems would tempt a pretty big crook. If his ears were keen enough and his fingers were sensitive enough, the lock of that vault wouldn't bother him long. Or you may have pried the combination out of the old man."

GAIL looked at the detective steadily. "I have been with the Westcoast Museum for five years, Mr. Bartlett. I am Doctor McEwan's confidential assistant. Doesn't that count for something?"

"Not a darned bit! Probably that is how you got onto the gems."

Gail's dark eyes flashed. "Am I permitted to go into the grounds?" she asked.

"Uh-huh," Bartlett grunted. "Better not go far, though."

She was to be watched!

There was a door at the lower end of the hall. Gail passed through it and found herself in a patio which extended from the rear of the house to the edge of the cliffs. The patio was like an anteroom or paradise. Much red tile, many singing birds, a pool with goldfish, old seats embowered with honeysuckle, wistaria, and bougainvillea, tempted her to linger.

Gail was reacting with astonishing calmness to the web of circumstance chance had spun around her. She realized that that position was dangerous, but her panic had passed and she refused to regard it as seriously as she had done at first.

Once the means of entrance and exit used by Conniston's murderer had been determined, she would be clear of suspicion. Her chief concern was to keep Kerry out of the affair. Where had he gone? she wondered anxiously.

She determined to familiarize herself with the beach and an approach to it so that she might keep her appointment with Kerry that night, presuming that it was safe to do so, of course. Her heart pounded mightily at the thought of seeing him. In the meantime her mood demanded vigorous expression. She must walk quickly, until the blood raced in her veins.

A cinder walk led to the edge of the cliff where it joined a path which ran along the cliff in each direction. For a moment Gail let her eyes rest on the brilliant blue of the ocean a hundred feet below. Then she continued along the sun-drenched path in the direction of the end of the peninsula.

A line of cypress trees extended along the cliff several yards from the extreme edge, forming a windbreak for the palms and peppers, the olive, the fig, and the citrus trees beyond. Some of the figs were ripe. Gail plucked several, peeled and bit into the luscious fruit, and cast the skins over the cliff.

A minute or two later she came to a little summer-house perched on the

edge of the cliff. It was round and thatched with palm fronds, and it looked like a huge mushroom. Wire screen enclosed the upper part of it and there were rustic benches inside. The door stood open and Gail entered. Cigarette butts were scattered around. This, then, was where Kerry had spent most of the night.

Suddenly, Gail saw a man dart from behind the thick foliage of one of the olive trees and vanish behind that of another. It was Decker! He had seen her! He was following her!

Gail was determined to go down to the beach, but there appeared to be no way of leaving the summer-house without Decker seeing her. She stood quite still for a moment, wondering what she should do. Then her eyes fell on one of the benches, and she began to smile delightedly.

"I wonder if I can do it!" she whispered.

Gail sat down on the bench.

Near the summer-house a trail ran down the cliff to the beach below. The descent appeared to be fairly easy, and Gail believed that she could get down unseen by Decker, provided she could lead him to believe that she had not left the summer-house.

Gail was wearing her hat, a flimsy affair of green straw, which she had unthinkingly put on before coming out of the house. The lower part of the summer-house was of wood, so the hat was the only part of her attire which Decker could now see.

She dragged one of the smaller benches toward her, upended it, and with a single quick movement ducked her head and transferred her hat to the uppermost end of the bench. She waited for a moment, breathlessly. Not so much as a rustle in the trees behind. Splendid! Doubling up, she dived out of the summer-house, scurried toward the head of the trail and swiftly dropped below the edge of the cliff.

Again she waited, her limbs tense and her heart going like a millrace. Nothing happened! Delighted with herself, she fled down the trail and reached the sandy beach.

The character of the cliffs fascinated her. Near the top they were of closely packed brown sand, but toward the bottom they were of sandstone of varying texture marvelously and fantastically sculptured by time and tide. As she trudged through the yielding sand, hugging the steepening walls closely, the lip of the cliff began to overhang and Gail saw that she was hidden from the sight of anyone who might be on the top.

CAVES penetrated into the cliff. Some of them were mere niches in the scarred and pitted rock; others ran darkly and dankly back into the heart of the cliff; a few, more fissures than caves, rent the face of the cliff from bottom to top. Gail peered into some of the darker caverns and drew back, shivering, into the warm and brilliant sunlight.

She saw nothing of Kerry.

Presently, Gail found herself approaching a mighty pillar of rock which rose a hundred feet above her. At one time it must have been a part of the cliff wall, but the hungry tides had eaten around it until, at high water, the rock was an island separated from the cliff by a dozen yards of white-capped breakers.

So impressive was the rock from this angle that Gail was urged to inspect it from its seaward side. Cautiously she picked her way over a slippery wetness of small boulders and green seaweed to a smooth flat rock sunk, as by design, in the floor of the beach directly in front of the pile.

As Gail looked up at the façade of the rock its extraordinary character quite took her breath away. Never had she seen anything like it before. It was slatey-blue in color and strati-

fied in formation. The lower strata, an inch or two thick, mounted in the form of tiny steps from the flat rock upon which she stood to a sort of platform some two feet above it. The platform was arched over by the contour of the rock, roughly giving it the effect of a theatre stage, or of the entrance to an ancient pagan temple, or of an altar consecrated to the sea gods.

Its resemblance to the latter grew more pronounced as Gail approached the tiny steps, for she found a font-like basin filled to the brim with sea-water sunk in the rock platform. Gail was enhanced by the weird beauty of her discovery. Had some priestly figure in the robes of his office stalked out of the shadowy niche behind the font and proceeded to incant his rituals over her head, she would have been prepared to accept him unquestioningly. It seemed beyond belief that merely wind and wave and time had sculptured out this austere beauty.

"Cathedral Rock!" she whispered. "I'm going to call it that!"

The cliffs behind the pillar of rock were perpendicular and the lap-lap of the turning tide warned Gail that she had better be getting back before she found herself cut off. She started back along the beach.

Presently, Gail was ascending the cliff trail again. At the top there was no sign of Decker and she entered the summer-house. Her hat was gone! For a moment she stood there, troubled by a premonition of disaster. Then she made her way slowly back to the house.

Gail entered the Casa de Ayer by way of the patio door and passed into the hall with the intention of going up to her room. But to reach the stairs she must first pass the door of the library which was open, and in there was Bartlett. She could hear his voice. If he saw her she would be called in to explain the matter of the hat, and Gail was weary of explanations. She wanted to go to her room and think things out for herself. Well, she must risk it. Noiselessly, she tip-toed past the door, reached the staircase and started up.

"Miss Hollister!"

Bartlett's curt voice cracked like a whip. Gail's hands dropped to her sides; the color fled from her cheeks. Decker appeared at the door of the library and favoring her with a sour grin jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"Chief wants yer!" he said unpleasantly.

Gail dragged herself down the stairs and along the hall to the library door. She paused for an instant; and then, with a toss of her copper-red head, she entered the somber room. Again she stopped. A hand of ice seemed laid on her heart.

Bartlett still sat in the chair behind the library table, stiff and erect and cold of eye. On the table lay her bright green hat, soiled and crushed. Stark lounged by the window. And in the two chairs which were drawn up in front of the table sat Conrad Gill and his son, Victor, the diamond brokers, whom Kerry O'Neil had stopped on the road the night before.

CHAPTER VII

ACCUSED!

FROM the first, Gail had dreaded the entrance of the Gills into the affair, but she had realized that it was almost inevitable and she was upset less by their presence in the library than by the suddenness with which she had come upon them. Fortunately she had the happy faculty of being able to adjust herself quickly to a difficult situation and almost at once she had her feelings well in hand again. She went forward into the room with the emo-

tions of an actor who comes upon a theatre stage at the highest point in the drama. Things were expected of her.

There were several other men in the room whom Gail took to be newspaper reporters. Keen-eyed, youngish men they were, and they regarded her with interest and frank admiration. Mr. Gill looked at her as if he wanted to pat her on the shoulder with his plump, white hand. His son, Victor, merely glanced at her carelessly, nodded his hawk-like head, and returned to a study of his immaculate finger nails.

Gail thought that she liked Victor Gill less than she liked his father and that she disliked him almost as much as she disliked Norman Stark. The latter still lounged by the window and there was something in his eyes as they rested on her that made Gail think of ice on hot flesh.

"Your hat, Miss Hollister," Bartlett said dryly.

Gail picked up the bit of milliner's confectionery and regarded it critically.

"It was so nice of Mr. Decker to bring it up," she murmured.

"Why did you evade him?" Bartlett snapped.

Gail smiled engagingly. "He was so terribly in earnest it seemed a shame to disappoint him."

Decker's long face darkened; the reporters tittered and got out their notebooks, and Mr. Gill regarded Gail with interest that was more sympathetic than ever. Bartlett sprang to his feet.

"You were down on the beach?"

"I was."

"What were you doing there?"

"Looking at the scenery."

"It wasn't scenery that took you there."

"Very well, Mr. Bartlett."

"Answer the question!"

"I have done so."

Bartlett resumed his seat and lit a cigar. Gail watched him and waited. Outwardly, she was calm, but inwardly she was on fire. How much did the Gills know? What had passed between them and Bartlett while she was down on the beach? Had Bartlett connected Kerry with the hold-up? The deputy's cold eyes rested on her again.

"Why didn't you report that hold-up last night?"

Gail shivered a little. It had come, at last!

"I suppose I should have," she replied. "But this awful affair"—her face saddened and she glanced at the still figure on the couch—"finding him like that, the hold-up seemed trivial in comparison."

"And I suppose it seemed *trivial* before you found Conniston dead," Bartlett drawled. "Last night, I mean."

Gail's eyes were the essence of candor; desperately she was fighting to keep her self-control. "Kerry!" she whispered to herself. The name seemed to give her fresh courage.

"I realize that I should have sent word to the man in the village," she went on. "But Colonel Conniston was so charming and his antiques were so interesting that I didn't!" It sounded unconvincing and she added hurriedly: "Besides, there is no telephone in the house."

Suddenly, a happy thought struck her and she looked at the diamond broker.

"You were the one to have notified the police, Mr. Gill, not me!" she cried warmly. "You *are* Mr. Gill, aren't you?"

With a nod, the latter assured her that he was.

"You did notify them, didn't you?"

Gail's tone implied that she took it for granted that he had.

Mr. Gill spread his white hands regretfully.

"To tell you the truth, we neglected to. We were staying in the village overnight and my son thought we might as well wait until morning, and we did. Isn't that so, Victor?"

"Quite so," Victor Gill responded.

"We got in touch with the local office an hour ago," Mr. Gill went on smoothly, "and they told us of the terrible affair up here. We came at once, of course."

"Your responsibility was greater than mine," Gail went on. "But surely it doesn't matter, Mr. Bartlett. They didn't lose anything——"

"How do you know they didn't?" Bartlett rapped out.

Gail caught her breath. "They couldn't have, or they would have called the police last night," she made quick response. He almost had her that time!

A little mutter of appreciation ran around the group. Bartlett slowly got out of his chair and perched himself on the corner of the table in front of Gail who was still standing.

"How long have you known this man O'Neil?" he demanded, emphasizing every word.

Gail felt weak and ill. She could hardly stand on her feet. Bartlett's question could mean only one thing: her efforts on Kerry's behalf had been of no avail.

The Gills had recognized the man who had held them up as the man whom they had seen hurriedly depart from the Casa de Ayer. "Kerry! Kerry!" Gail did not know what to do, what to say.

SHE stared around the group, desperately searching for sympathy in the circle of faces that hemmed her in. Mr. Gill was appraising her as he would an uncut gem. His son, Victor, betrayed no interest in anything but his finger nails. Stark had a look in his eyes that sickened her. How she detested the man!

The reporters, a hard-boiled crew at first glance, were impersonal in their attitudes and their expressions of interest. And then Gail encountered the eye of the youngest of the reporters. It was anything but hard-boiled; there was humor and a twinkling warmth in it, and she felt her strength and courage revive.

"O'Neil," she said steadily. "I know a Mr. O'Neil. I met him in Los Angeles. Surely you don't mean——"

Bartlett cut her short. "I mean that this man O'Neil, who called on the colonel last night, is the man who held up the Gills, and you know it, my girl! The Gills recognized him, and so did you!"

"The man was masked," Gail whispered. "They couldn't have!"

Mr. Gill spread his white hands again. "To be sure he was masked, Miss Hollister. But—er—haven't you noticed his ears?"

"His ears," Gail repeated tonelessly.

"Victor noticed them as O'Neil came out of the house, and again on the highway. Quite the smallest ears you ever saw, weren't they, Victor?"

"Quite," Victor Gill said calmly.

"Victor has remarkably keen sight," Mr. Gill went on. "Miss Hollister recognized the man, of course."

Gail was silent. Kerry's ears had betrayed him! Many a time had she teased him about them, for they were the smallest she had ever seen on a man; small and delicately made. And the black eyes of Victor Gill had picked them out! The man must have the eyesight of a hawk! The thing was fantastic, incredible; and yet it was true. There was nothing she could say. She looked at Bartlett and waited, her face white and pitiful. He came to the point quickly.

"I want you to consider the evidence, Miss Hollister. O'Neil called on Colonel Conniston last night. Evidently, he didn't get what he

wanted. They quarreled, and he left in a rage. Later, he stopped the Gills and demanded the Conniston intaglios. Cool, eh? You came along and recognized him. O'Neil then dropped his gun and ran. Probably he figured the Gills hadn't the intaglios as he had thought. Later, Conniston is found dead.

"Very well. Now look at the rest of it. You neglected to report the hold-up. You know this man O'Neil, and your replies to my questions have been evasive and contradictory. Add all this to the fact that every door and window in the house was bolted on the inside at the time Conniston was killed, and that you were in the house, and we have a pretty conclusive case against you.

"As for O'Neil, it is clear that he wanted the intaglios and that he didn't care how he got 'em. So he came back, killed Conniston, opened the vault, and took them. I'll bet my last dollar they are not in the vault now. You let him in and let him out, through that window there, probably. But you slipped up on the job by bolting the window behind him. They always do. Get your things together. I'm going to take you along with me."

Gail recoiled from the man in horror. Take her with him, he had said. Take her where? What did he mean? But she knew very well what he meant and the knowledge harrowed her soul. In despair she searched the circle of faces around her. Every one of them accused her, except that of the young reporter.

There was a look of bewilderment in his eyes as if he couldn't make up his mind. Kerry! Dear Kerry! He would be with her if he knew! Perhaps she had done wrong in urging him to go. Well, she would stick to her guns. They shouldn't drag a word about him out of her! Suddenly, a ray of hope pierced the darkness of her despair.

"You have forgotten about the man I saw in the moonlight last night!" she cried desperately. "You can't accuse Kerry O'Neil, or me, or anyone else, until you know that he isn't the man who killed Colonel Conniston! He is the man! You've *got* to find him!"

"That would be O'Neil, if it was anyone," Bartlett said casually. "Get yourself ready!"

"It wasn't!" Gail cried hysterically. "I know Kerry ONeil too well to be mistaken!"

BARTLETT nodded ironically. "You should," he said. Then he looked at the girl narrowly as if her desperate earnestness had made some slight impression on him.

"The evidence is clear against you, my girl. If you had someone to support this yarn I'd consider it, but you haven't."

"And that's all you know about it, Mr. Detective, for I saw the man myself!"

It was Mrs. Wessels who had so dramatically substantiated Gail's declaration. She had come into the room unnoticed by the girl. Now she was advancing upon Gail and Bartlett with her hands on her hips and a heightened color in her cheeks. The room was very quiet. So quiet indeed that it might have been empty. And then Bartlett's voice cracked sharply:

"What's that you say?"

Mrs. Wessels' eyes darted fire at the the deputy. "Half-past three it was that I saw 'im."

"How do you know it was?"

"Because I got up, and while I was up, I remembered I'd forgotten to wind my alarm clock. And the colonel liking his breakfast at eight sharp——"

"You got up. Why?"

"My 'ead," Mrs. Wessels explained succinctly.

"Your what?"

"My 'ead. It was aching fit to split. I wanted a haspirin. I keep them in a bottle in the bathroom. The bathroom 'as an east window. I looked through it and saw—*'im!*" Mrs. Wessels paused dramatically. "He 'opped across a bit of moonlight on the drive and vanished before you could say Jack Robinson!"

Again that tense stillness in the room.

"You saw him?" Bartlett snapped. "This man, O'Neil?"

Mrs. Wessels' attitude changed curiously. Her hands dropped from her hips; she shrank back as if she were afraid, and Gail, who was watching her with hope leaping in her heart, got the impression that she had said more, much more, than she had intended to. Gail slipped her hand into Mrs. Wessels' and the latter seemed to find courage in the contact. Her head went up with a jerk.

"No, and it wasn't this Kerry O'Neil, Mr. Detective!"

"Ah! you didn't recognize him, eh?"

"That I did!"

"Who was it?"

Gail felt Mrs. Wessels hand tremble in hers.

"Go on," she whispered.

The housekeeper stiffened again. Her eyes ran around the tense-faced group and rested on Norman Stark.

"It was you as I saw, Mr. Stark," she said, in a low tone. "And I don't care if I do lose my place."

And in that instant Gail knew where she had seen Stark's thickly-set figure before!

CHAPTER VIII

TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD

MRS. Wessels had never played the rôle of leading lady before; nevertheless, she carried it off with credit to herself, facing the old fury of Stark and the sharp suspicion of Bartlett without so much as the tremor of an eyelid.

Stark did not move away from the window, but into his gray-green eyes leaped so malevolent an expression that Gail, who was breathlessly watching him, drew back in alarm. His heavy lips trembled with passion and a moment had passed before he could control his speech.

"The woman is lying!" he said thickly. "I was in my apartment in Los Angeles until four-thirty this morning!"

He said this with his eyes on Bartlett, and with the ring of truth in his voice. But Gail knew that it was *he* and not Mrs. Wessels who was lying.

She had seen Stark herself the night before, and while it had required Mrs. Wessels' evidence to make her realize that it was he, she had not the slightest doubt now that the man she had caught a glimpse of as he slunk across the pool of moonlight was indeed Conniston's nephew, and no one else.

Stark's heavy physique and the set and swing of his body were those of the man she had seen. Her mind was quite made up on this point. It could mean but one thing and she recoiled from it in horror.

Stark had killed Colonel Conniston and got out of the house by some secret exit. Probably he had the intaglios. She regarded the man with fresh loathing.

But her heart was singing. Mrs. Wessels had saved her. Bartlett had a shrewd brain, and even if he did not accept the housekeeper's statement as truth he could not leave it out of his calculations. *Her* job was to find some means of trapping Stark!

Mrs. Wessels had bristled at the latter's tone.

"I'm not in the 'abit of lying, Mr. Stark, sir," she said indignantly. "It was you all right, and you know it!"

Mrs. Wessels said this bravely. Gail alone guessed what the effort had cost her, for Stark was now her employer, and Mrs. Wessels had an undemocratic appreciation of the difference in their respective stations.

"Miss 'Ollister 'adn't a thing to do with it!" she went on vigorously, addressing Bartlett. "And I don't care who says she 'ad.' And there's another thing, too," she went on shrewdly, "until you can prove I am lying, like Mr. Stark says, you can't touch a hair of 'er 'ead!"

"Exactly where were you at four o'clock this morning, Mr. Stark?" Bartlett demanded curtly.

"Asleep in my apartment in Los Angeles. The telephone woke me."

"Can you prove that?"

Stark looked at him ironically. "Am I expected to?"

"You would dispose of this woman's evidence if you could."

"I can't. I live alone and I was asleep in my room. A man doesn't take an alibi to bed with him. Surely you don't believe this fool yarn, Bartlett! The housekeeper has taken a fancy to this girl and they've made it up between them!"

"No one saw you leave the apartment house?" Bartlett cut in brusquely.

"Not so far as I know."

Bartlett drummed on the table with his fingers. Then he addressed Mrs. Wessels.

"Why didn't you report this before?"

"You didn't ask me," Mrs. Wessels said with suspicious stupidity.

"How could you have made out the face of the man at that distance?" Bartlett went on sharply.

"I couldn't have."

"Then how do you know it was Stark?"

It was evident to Gail to whose statement Bartlett inclined.

Mrs. Wessels aggressively set her hands on her hips.

"I knew 'im by 'is walk and 'is build, and if that ain't enough for a body what's seen 'im off and on some fifteen years, I'd like to know what is!"

There was silence again.

"All right," Bartlett snapped. "You can go!" With a look at Gail: "Both of you."

GAIL went to the door with a smile on her lips and a song in her heart. Mrs. Wessels, whose genius had given her back her liberty, ambled ponderously and indignantly behind. Gail opened the door and passed into the hall—and nearly tripped over a man crouched there.

"Dimity!" she whispered in astonishment.

The little man climbed to his feet and eyed her sullenly; then he backed down the shadowy hall and, before Gail could utter a word of protest, vanished from sight. She stared after him in bewilderment until, turning, she found Mrs. Wessels standing beside her, lips tight and hands still on her hips.

"Well, I'm blessed!" Mrs. Wessels said.

Gail glanced back into the library. Then she put her fingers on her lips for silence. Mrs. Wessels nodded reluctantly and passed down the hall to the kitchen.

Thoughtfully, Gail went up to her room.

She drew a chair up to the window and, resting her chin in her hand, let her mind run back over the events of the last twelve hours. The efforts to think calmed her and gave her a sense of mastery over herself which she had not had since her encounter with Kerry and the Gills on the highway.

More than ever was she inclined to the theory that Conniston's murderer had entered and left the house by

some secret door or panel. The theory was quite in keeping with the romantic atmosphere of the Casa de Ayer.

Might not the Spanish don who had built the place have provided it with a secret door to be used in case of emergency arising out of the unsettled condition of the country at that time?

The idea was fascinating. It appealed to her tremendously.

If there was such an exit from the house, knowledge of it on the part of Conniston's murderer implied considerable familiarity with the construction of the place. This, of course, presented to Gail again the problem of Norman Stark. She was convinced that he had killed Conniston and taken the intaglios.

He was Conniston's nephew and heir. Who, now living, would know more of the Casa de Ayer and its secrets, if it had any, than he?

But if Stark had the intaglios, and provided the vault was not open already, how had the combination come into his possession? And why had he relocked the vault and left the house by means of this secret way, the existence of which she was assuming? To divert suspicion from himself and fasten it upon those within the house —this answered the last question.

And certainly it seemed to be the true answer, for had not Mrs. Wessels caught a glimpse of Stark in the moonlight he would have been beyond suspicion and she, Gail Hollister, would have been on her way to jail.

And now Gail found herself contemplating the problem of Dimity. Where did the queer little man fit into the puzzle? A thought struck her. Had Dimity killed his master? It was shocking, but conceivable. Quite so, indeed! The little man's queerness, his vague replies, his peep-hole spying—all this counted tremendously against him. If it were Dimity her secret exit theory was disposed of. However, she still clung to her first conception. Stark had been in the grounds; he must be guilty.

And then her mind was seized by a fresh thought that drained the color from her cheeks. Were Dimity and Stark in the affair together? Dimity was listening at the library door, fully dressed, while she was examining the body. Mightn't he have let Stark in and let him out when the thing was done?

Again was her secret exit theory disposed of. Perhaps Stark had some hold upon Dimity and the little man had been driven to a partnership in crime. Such an explanation would account for his surreptitious listening and watching.

On the other hand, Dimity's years of faithful service told against any theory that involved him in the crime. His mind was unbalanced, certainly, but according to Colonel Conniston his abnormality had driven him to an excess of tenderness for and watchfulness over his employer, to anything, indeed, but the taking of his life.

Automatically, Gail's mind swung back to her first theory. Stark! When a favorable opportunity presented itself she would make a tour of the house in the hope of coming upon this secret door or panel, in the existence of which her certainty of Stark's guilt inclined her to believe. Not that she would be likely to find it!

She stood up, shook herself vigorously, and opened the window. The breeze freshened her and she stood there with her face to it, drinking in the warm salt air.

Suddenly, Gail saw half a dozen men, with Decker in the lead, break away from the house and advance upon the wooded grounds of the estate. Their vigilant attitudes puzzled her for a moment, then she guessed their purpose. Bartlett had brought up reinforcements. They

were a search party and Kerry O'Neil was their quarry! Had Bartlett reason to believe that Kerry was still on the peninsula?

Gail was in terror for a moment, but she comforted herself with the thought that they hadn't got him yet. Her confidence in Kerry equaled her faith in him.

She reflected that if Bartlett had any suspicion of her intentions she might disarm it somewhat by commencing the classification of the Conniston antiques. At any rate, the work would occupy her attention until evening.

The museum was open, but there was no one in it. Sunlight streamed in through narrow, barred windows and motes of dust danced in the beams. Nevertheless, the long room maintained its atmosphere of shadowy antiquity, and as Gail passed between the glass cases with their comprehensive record of the achievements of the past she grew depressed and troubled in spirit.

A filing cabinet, a desk, and a chair were at the lower end of the museum. The cabinet, Gail found, contained square folders stuffed with the colonel's notes. Smiling sadly, she took out several of the folders and sitting at the desk began to examine their contents.

They were in an appalling state of confusion. Much of the writing was illegible. Old envelopes, scraps of paper, margins of newspaper clippings, leaves from well-thumbed notebooks—anything, in fact, had served the colonel in his moments of inspiration.

Gail shook her head at the magnitude of the task before her, and set to work.

Half an hour had passed when Gail quite suddenly had an unpleasant sense of no longer being alone. She had heard no one approach, but she felt that she was watched. A chill ran down her spine and a moment passed before she could force herself to turn around.

She was not surprised to find Norman Stark standing a short distance behind her.

"Hello, Miss Hollister." he drawled. "Busy already?"

There was a queer light in his arrogant eyes. Gail's skin tingled.

"I didn't hear you come in," she said coldly. Her hands trembled as they fumbled with the papers before her.

STARK came noiselessly to the desk, picked up one of the papers and glanced at it carelessly. He dropped it and, perching himself on a corner of the desk, bent his eyes on Gail again. The girl shuddered. She felt that he wanted to put his hands upon her—those heavy, supple hands that had brought death to one of his own blood!

"Do you still pretend to believe that you and Mrs. Wessels saw me in the moonlight this morning, Miss Hollister?" he asked with a grin.

Gail eyed him coolly for a moment.

"It was you that we saw, Mr. Stark," she said indifferently. "I recognized you myself as soon as Mrs. Wessels spoke."

Stark lit a cigarette. The grin had left his thick lips. There was something behind the arrogance in his eyes that repelled Gail.

"I suppose you suggested the yarn to Mrs. Wessels," he went on casually.

"Very well, Mr. Stark."

Her coolness irritated him; he eyed her sullenly.

"You are making a mistake."

"Mistake?"

"I mean in taking your present attitude. Don't you realize what is involved?"

"Oh, quite!"

"Lies are dangerous tools, young lady."

She nodded.

"You will find them so, I fear."

"A charge of murder is pretty serious," he went on.

Gail smiled.

"You should have thought of that last night."

"You have nerve to accuse me of killing my uncle!" he shouted thickly.

Gail was unmoved by his outburst.

"I know what we saw. So does Mrs. Wessels. And so do you!"

Stark stood up, his hands knotted. He stared furiously down at her, as if he had something else to say. But instead of giving utterance to whatever was in his mind he turned on his heel and strode out of the museum. The atmosphere seemed the sweeter for his going.

The encounter had broken the train of Gail's thought and she could not immediately recapture her sense of the notes before her. How consistently the man stuck to his denial!

Clearly, Mrs. Wessels' evidence would be insufficient in itself. Her own would be useless, of course. Somehow, she must secure corroborative evidence. But how? The enormity of the task appalled her.

Barely had Gail collected her thoughts again than there came the tread of quick feet behind her. Looking up, she saw the young reporter in whose twinkling eyes she had found sympathy when Bartlett was cross-examining her. He greeted her with a friendly smile.

"I'm Ted Perrin, of the Los Angeles *Blade*, Miss Hollister," he began, by way of introduction. "I hope I am not bothering you too much."

He perched himself on the corner of the desk, as Stark had done, and regarded Gail with frank admiration in his gray eyes. She did not resent it. He was a pleasant-looking young man, about twenty-five, and Gail thought that he hadn't been a reporter for very long.

"No," she said, with a smile, "you are not bothering me. I suppose you want something for your paper."

"That's about it," he grinned. "But I want to help you, too."

"I need help badly, Mr. Perrin," Gail said seriously.

"I know you do, Miss Hollister. You are in an awful mess. I wish you'd tell me the truth of it."

"The truth," Gail echoed. "What do you mean?"

Perrin lowered his eyes.

"Well," he said, "I've got a hunch you hadn't anything to do with the murder of old Conniston."

"Thank you," Gail murmured. "I wish you'd pass it on to Mr. Bartlett."

"I've tried to," Perrin grinned, "but he won't bite. Why don't you come through with what you know? Tell a straight yarn about this man O'Neil and you'll clear yourself!"

Gail studied him gravely.

"You think Kerry O'Neil killed Colonel Conniston, then?"

"Nothing surer. Look at the evidence."

"Mr. Stark hasn't accounted for his presence here early this morning."

Perrin became very earnest indeed.

"I shouldn't stick to that yarn if I were you, Miss Hollister."

"But Mrs. Wessels saw him, too!"

"Yes, she said so."

Gail was silent. The impregnability of this wall of disbelief frightened her. She met it at every turn.

"It sounds too thin in face of the other evidence," he went on slowly. "The hold-up, the bolted doors and windows——"

"But you just said you don't believe I had anything to do with it!" Gail interposed ironically.

PERRIN colored.

"To tell the truth, I don't know what I believe!" he cried desperately.

"Someone let O'Neil into the house

and let him out again. That much is certain! From the evidence it looks as if it were you—oh, confound it!"

He broke off savagely.

"I don't mean that, either! O'Neil got into the house and you know something about it! What, I don't know. Why don't you tell a straight yarn? I believe you know where he is. He's making a fool of you—using you for his own ends! You are—you——"

"Yes, Mr. Perrin?" Gail said.

The reporter drew a long breath.

"The trouble is, you are in love with him!"

Gail stared at him speechlessly, but with a singular lack of resentment. In love with Kerry! She had never put it that bluntly even to herself! Was it true? To her astonishment, she found herself saying:

"Perhaps I am."

Perrin opened his mouth ludicrously and stared at Gail with a rather wild look in his eyes.

"Bartlett has a line on him already!" he stormed. "Can't you see through him? He's a ne'er-do-well—a cheap adventurer—a slick crook."

"Mr. Perrin!" Gail was on her feet, dark eyes blazing.

He saw his blunder instantly.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I wanted to help you——"

Gail sat down, shaken by the storm of emotion that had swept through her. He had attacked the foundations of her faith in Kerry! She felt herself to be on the verge of hysteria and she had to clench her hands and grit her teeth to keep herself in hand.

Perrin stood up uneasily. A change had come over him. His eyes were evasive in their expression. His manner suggested that having failed in the more desirable expedient he was reluctantly falling back on the only alternative. If Gail noticed this change in his attitude she was too distressed to reflect upon it.

"The inquest is to be held tomorrow afternoon," he remarked casually.

"Oh," Gail responded coldly. "Where?"

"Here."

Perrin lighted a cigarette with hands that shook.

"Bartlett and his men will probably leave after it is over."

Gail's heart gave a leap.

"Leave?" she echoed. "Where are they going?"

Perrin drew on his cigarette.

"Los Angeles," he slowly replied. "They think O'Neil is up there."

"But they are looking for him here!" Gail exclaimed.

"Yes, I know. Bartlett can't afford to take any chances. But he doesn't think O'Neil is down here now."

Perrin seemed to say this with difficulty.

Gail could not trust herself to speak or to meet Perrin's eyes. If Bartlett and his men were going away, Kerry's chances of keeping his liberty were excellent!

Perrin was studying the glowing end of his cigarette.

"Stark is going for a day or so, too, I believe," he volunteered, after a pause. "About that reward, I suppose."

"Reward?" Gail cried.

"Yes. Didn't you hear? Stark has offered ten thousand for the return of the intaglios—no questions asked."

Gail stared at him incredulously. "Why, he doesn't, or he isn't supposed to know that they are gone! They haven't the vault open yet."

"Oh, they are gone all right. Anyhow, there's an expert coming down today or tomorrow to open the vault."

Gail was silent. A smile curved her lips. Stark was thorough in his methods, at any rate! Ten thousand dollars reward! And he had the intaglios himself!

Perrin looked at the girl with

troubled eyes, nervously drawing on his cigarette. But Gail was too busy with her thoughts to heed him. Reluctantly, he turned on his heel and with downcast face walked slowly out of the museum.

"Ten thousand dollars reward!" Gail whispered to herself. "And they are leaving tomorrow!"

CHAPTER IX

THE RIDDLE OF DIMITY

SHORTLY after Gail's encounter with Perrin, Shoriff Green, Bartlett's immediate superior, arrived at the Casa de Ayer, and she was compelled to undergo an examination at his hands every bit as rigorous as the one to which Bartlett had subjected her that morning.

Gail was weary of this endless round of question and accusation and by the time they dismissed her she was exhausted. Nevertheless, she stood by what she had already told Bartlett, and in face of pronounced hostility on the part of the two officers passionately insisted upon an impartial consideration of Mrs. Wessels' evidence.

The latter was the only point in her and Kerry's favor, and she clung to it tenaciously.

"Mrs. Wessels saw him—I saw him!" she reiterated. "You can't get over that! You've got to make Stark explain what he was doing in the grounds at three o'clock this morning!"

"We'll attend to Stark, my girl!" the sheriff said grimly. "You might explain a few things yourself, though. What did O'Neil do with the intaglios, for instance?"

Gail looked at him furiously.

"I suppose you are after Stark's ten thousand dollar reward!"

"We are after O'Neil!" the sheriff said curtly. "We expect to get him, too."

This was all Gail could get out of the man. Her speculations concerning Dimity she kept to herself. The sheriff withdrew shortly afterward, leaving Bartlett in charge of the case.

That evening, from the patio, Gail watched the sun set in a golden sea and the sky flare and flame like an artist's dream. Darkness came quickly. And as the silver and shadow of the moonlit night replaced the brilliant hues of sunset Gail pondered upon how she might evade Bartlett and his men and get down to the beach unobserved.

Not for a moment had she doubted that Kerry would be waiting, but the undertaking filled her with apprehension. She was almost tempted to abandon it. However, Kerry's need of food overrode every other consideration. Food he *must* have!

The kitchen was in darkness when she entered the house. Evidently, Mrs. Wessels and Dimity had gone up to their rooms. Gail noiselessly entered the kitchen, closed the door, drew the window shade, and switched on the light.

Quickly she sliced and buttered half a loaf of bread. The ice box yielded cold chicken and boiled ham and she made a great pile of sandwiches, added to it a quarter of an apple pie and a generous slab of Mrs. Wessels' fruit cake. Wrapping her spoil in a newspaper, she put out the lights, cautiously opened the window, and set the bundle down on the ledge outside.

Scarcely had she done this than there came the slur of feet in the hall. They were coming toward the kitchen. She was panic-stricken for a moment. A sob broke in her heart, but she pulled herself together and with trembling hands softly slid the window down, swept across the floor, and snapped on the lights. She awaited, heart pounding horribly.

The door opened slowly, and a gasp

of relief forced itself from her parted lips.

It was Dimity!

She did not know why she should feel relieved that it was no one else, unless it was the certainty that Dimity, like herself, knew more than he had told. He stared at her with suspicion in his black button eyes.

"Dimity!" Gail whispered. "What do you want?"

Neither of them seemed to notice the absurdity of the question.

"I forgot my pipe," he mumbled.

It lay on the kitchen table. Dimity picked it up and dropped it into a pocket. Averting his eyes from the girl, he started back to the door.

"Dimity!"

He looked at her in sullen silence for a moment.

"Yes, Missie?"

"You know something, Dimity. What is it?"

His black eyes widened, brightened, filled with fear.

"Missie!" he whispered.

"You do, Dimity. You do! What is it?"

He fell back, his fingers to his lips. Gail followed him up, step by step. She had the sense of being on the verge of something.

"Do you know who killed Colonel Conniston?"

He gave a little cry and covered his face with his hands.

"You do! You do!" Gail whispered exultantly. She gripped him by the arm. "You must tell me, Dimity!"

His black eyes, wet with tears, stared into hers.

"Tomorrow, Missie! I'll tell you tomorrow!"

And with this Dimity suddenly wrenched his arm out of her grasp, spun around, and was gone through the kitchen door before she could stop him.

EXASPERATED, Gail jumped after him, but she paused in the doorway and snapped on the lights. Cigarette smoke hung in the hall and the library door was ajar.

If she attempted to stop Dimity, who was proceeding along the hall to the stairs, she would be discovered by whoever was in the library. Discovery meant more interrogation and Gail had had her fill of Bartlett and his questions. He might prevent her from going down to the beach.

Moreover, the deputy's antagonism had been so pronounced that she was disinclined to take him into her confidence. (A thousand times better if she had, as Gail was presently to know!)

Gail stood in the darkness of the kitchen door thinking about what Dimity had said. How much did he know?

"Does he really mean to tell me tomorrow?" she whispered to herself.

Oddly enough, she was more depressed than hopeful as a result of the encounter.

Gail passed out into the patio and, shrinking back against the side of the house, peered into the shadows about her and listened intently. There was no one in sight. She heard the murmur of the surf—nothing else.

Softly she crept toward the kitchen window, got the package of food, and listened again.

Then she picked her way down the cinder walk, melting into the shadows cast by shrub and vine, and came to the row of cypress trees that skirted the path by the cliff. She stopped again.

Scarcely had she done so than a man emerged out of the shadow on the opposite side of the patio and stepped into a pool of moonlight. Gail shuddered.

It was one of Bartlett's men. He was looking in her direction. Had he seen her? So still did the man stand

that he seemed to be carved out of moonlight and shadow.

Gail did not dare to move. Her body was drenched with perspiration. She did not know what to do.

If the man had seen her, and she was found with the package of food in her hand, only one conclusion would be drawn. Yet she dare not attempt to dispose of it.

The man appeared to be listening. Perhaps he had heard something, but had not seen her. If only he would declare himself! The suspense was torture! Ah! he was moving. He was going toward the house!

Gail could have wept with relief. The man passed into the house, and she had an intuitive certainty that she was unobserved.

Gathering herself together, she flew like the wind down the path and came to the summer house at the head of the cliff trail. Again she stopped and listened and peered at the soft darkness around her. Thump, thump went her heart. It threatened to burst asunder.

She saw no one, heard nothing but the wild song of the surf and the indefinite whisperings of the silver night.

Bending low, Gail crept to the head of the trail and dropped over the lip of the cliff. There she crouched, her body taut and rigid, every sense on the alert. If she were under observation surely the fact would now be disclosed.

For a full minute she waited, but there came no stealthy footstep, no whispering voice. Joyously she rose to her feet and picked her way down the trail. The descent was easy. She reached the silvery beach without mishap and fled along it into the shadows cast by the cliffs where they overhung.

However, Gail had gone but a dozen steps when she stopped in terror.

Against the darkness of the cliff she saw a shadow that moved. It advanced upon her, materialized into the figure of a man.

Dropping the package of food, she pressed her hand to her lips to stifle the scream that rose in her throat. The man drew nearer, stood before her, grinning.

"Gail!"

It was Kerry.

CHAPTER X

THE MADNESS OF KERRY O'NEIL

So intense was her relief that Gail almost flung herself upon him, sobbing. He caught her hands and pressed them until her heart beat with an exquisite gladness. He seemed about to draw her to him. Instead, he held her thus, his dark eyes striking fire in hers.

"I frightened you, Gail! I'm sorry."

"Oh, Kerry! I'm so glad!" she whispered.

He laughed, that ringing laugh of his that always reminded her of a silver bell.

"Not so loud!" she cautioned. "Bartlett has brought half a dozen men down. They may be up along the top."

Kerry grinned. "Let 'em come. They won't get me, unless I want them to."

"Want them to!" Gail echoed, in alarm.

"I can't go on this way forever."

"You've only had one day of it," Gail said. "You mustn't think of giving yourself up now, Kerry," she went on earnestly. "The Gills recognized you, and Bartlett thinks you did it. But something is bound to turn up before long—tomorrow, perhaps! You will be patient a little longer, won't you, Kerry? I have oceans of things to tell you."

Kerry knelt by the parcel of food

she had dropped. It had come apart, displaying its tempting array of eatables.

"You dear girl!" he cried, and took a huge bite out of one of the chicken sandwiches. "Good!"

"I knew you'd be starving," Gail cried, hovering over him maternally.

Kerry chuckled. "Not on your life! I had lobster salad for lunch and dinner. There's another left for breakfast."

"Don't be absurd," Gail laughed.

"I'm not," he assured her gravely, when he had taken another bite. "I was down by the Green Crocodile at dawn." He waved his hand toward the tip of the peninsula. "There was nobody around and I found a couple of lobster traps in a pool and there were three lobsters in them. Then I turned up an old kettle on the beach, made a fire, and boiled 'em."

Kerry chuckled and helped himself to another sandwich.

"I served 'em to myself on an abalone shell garnished with lettuce and celery from the Green Croc gardens." A huge bite. "These sandwiches are darned good, Gail!"

She was laughing at the spectacle of his hunger. The gay impudence of him!

"We've got to talk, Kerry," she told him. "Where can we go? I am afraid someone will hear us if we stay here."

Kerry gathered up the food and, taking Gail by the hand, led her along the beach to a concavity in the cliff wall. It was not deep enough to be called a cave, but it was arched over, and in it was a smooth, flat boulder that made a splendid seat for two.

They sat and talked and listened a moment or two to the low tide murmuring its ancient love song to the gleaming sand.

"Now," Kerry said at last, "let's hear it."

And Gail proceeded to tell him what she knew, pitching her voice so low that he had to bring his dark head against the copper-red flame of hers. She told him of what she and Mrs. Wessels had seen in the moonlight, of Dimity and Stark and the latter's ten-thousand-dollar reward.

She told him of the bolted doors and windows, of the evidence of the Gills, and of her speculations upon the possibility of there being a secret exit from the Casa de Ayer.

Above all, and most emphatically, she told him of the danger of his position, of his inability to accomplish anything by giving himself up, and of her certainty that the guilt of Stark and the innocence of himself presently would be established. Needless to say, she did not tell him how narrowly she had escaped arrest.

"The case appears to hang on my ears," he said, with a grin, when she had finished. Then his face sobered. "It seems to lie between Stark and Dimity, so far, with the odds on Stark." He looked at Gail searchingly. "Sure it was Stark you and Mrs. Wessels saw, Gail? You know how deceptive things look when seen in the moonlight."

"Quite sure, Kerry."

He nodded. "Stark killed Connis-ton, then. For the intaglios, I suppose. And Dimity must have let him in."

"I don't know about Dimity," Gail said doubtfully. "There may be some secret way of getting into the house. It's just the place for secret doors and secret staircases."

KERRY grinned.

"Maybe," he admitted. "I wouldn't count on that, though. Keep your eye on Dimity. I'd bet my last dollar he knows a thing or two. The police seem to have passed him up altogether."

"They are so sure it is you," Gail

said soberly. She did not tell him that Dimity had promised to reveal what he knew the next day. It might amount to nothing and she didn't want to raise his hopes without foundation.

"But look at the facts for a minute," he went on. "Dimity was fully dressed when you found the body and, according to you and Mrs. Wessels and Colonel Conniston, he is always listening and watching. Why? Nobody knows. I think I told you that I tumbled over him myself when I rushed out of the library.

"There's something queer there, take it from me, Gail. Dimity is either miles deep or crazy." O'Neil grew thoughtful. "I wish I could get into the house for an hour or two; I believe I'd turn up something."

Gail was aghast at the notion.

"What on earth could you do there?" she cried, and caught him fiercely by the arm, her dark eyes pleading with him in a manner that was unmistakable, particularly in the moonlight. "You are not going up there, Kerry. Everything will come out all right. Just be patient a little longer." Then, with an affectation of lightness: "It's your turn now."

O'Neil stared at her with a blaze of light in his dark eyes, and Gail found herself trembling at his side. Then his mood changed as by an effort of will. He fell silent and a flood of color mantled his lean face. For a moment he stared seaward. Gail saw that his clenched hands were white at the knuckles.

"I don't know how to begin, Gail," he began penitently. "I've made an awful fool of myself. I don't know how you can believe in me as you do. It was just the kind of idiotic thing I *would* do, of course, and it seemed absolutely right to me last night. I was just getting my own back and all that, but now, with you sitting here—oh, darn it all, here goes!

"Years ago my Dad and old Conniston were all over the world together. That's how Conniston got his collection, most of it, anyhow. But Dad wasn't much of a man to collect. People, the way they lived, what they were thinking about, and all that sort of thing, interested him more. He was all sympathy, feeling, generosity, emotion. I never met a man who cared less for material possessions, money and what it will bring, than he did.

"In a sense, that's why I'm in this mess—not that I blame Dad for it, of course. There was money in the family then; but Dad was always in the South Seas, or India, or Thibet, or South America, or Europe, and he left his affairs to the lawyers.

"After he married my mother things were different. She was a woman of firm character, and that was the end of Dad's traveling around. Well, he'd seen a good deal of the world and he was very fond of mother, so he settled down in New York. I was born a year or so later.

"Dad and Conniston grew apart as men often do, but they didn't lose their affection for each other. I imagine, though, Conniston was a little impatient with Dad for giving in to mother as he did; and Dad may have felt a little shamefaced about it, too. They corresponded occasionally, but they never saw each other again.

"I think my mother regarded Conniston as a sort of natural enemy of the home life she wanted. Anyhow, she discouraged the friendship. Conniston bought this house here, but he was always going off somewhere. In fact, he made quite a reputation as an explorer.

"Two years ago my parents went to Europe. They returned on the *Atlantis*. You know what happened to the *Atlantis*, Gail. She went down

off the Newfoundland banks and my folks were drowned."

THERE was silence for a minute. Gail's hand crept into Kerry's. In the shadows, they were like two bronze figures cast against the impressive statuary of the cliffs. Then the night seemed to draw them to its breast, to soothe them with its white magic. Kerry went on again.

"I found Dad's affairs in an awful mess when I took hold of them. There was hardly any money left. His lawyers had bungled things badly. I've an idea there was crooked work somewhere. It didn't matter much to me just then. I had graduated as a mining engineer, and I had done pretty well, considering what an impetuous fool I'd always been and all the traveling around I had done.

"But six months ago I did another fool thing. I bought a silver mine in Mexico. The mine is all right, but when I'd paid for it I found I hadn't any money left to develop it. And that brings me to the Conniston intaglios.

"As I said, Dad never really cared for collecting old stuff; but Conniston was crazy about it. Especially about these intaglio gems. It seems that he got most of them while Dad was with him and Dad, I understand, helped him, financially and otherwise.

"Just what the arrangement was I don't know. There was no legal formality about it. My father was the last man in the world for that sort of thing. He'd trust the devil himself if he asked him to. But it seems that he had a half interest in the intaglios. They were worth about two hundred thousand then.

"When Dad married and settled down Conniston was perfectly honest about the gems. He wanted to sell them and pay Dad his share, but Dad wouldn't hear of it. He didn't need the money and he knew how Conniston adored the gems. So their sale was put off indefinitely. Conniston was delighted with the arrangement, of course.

"Commercially, it was s o u n d enough. The gems were increasing in value every year. Well, I had almost forgotten about them when I found I needed money for my mine—needed it badly. I hated to hurt Conniston by forcing a sale of the gems, but it was that or lose every dollar I had in the world.

"When my parents were drowned, Conniston telegraphed and wrote his sympathy, and I believe he felt their death deeply. But he didn't say anything about the intaglios, and I was too full of trouble and worry to do anything myself. I intended to see Conniston about them later on, of course; but I didn't need the money then and I kept putting it off. You'll call that my father's irresponsibility, I suppose."

Kerry grinned sheepishly.

"I didn't think Conniston was trying to rob me of my share of the stones, and I don't think so now. I supposed he had had 'em so long and Dad had been so indifferent about them, that he expected me to make the first move.

"Well, I let things slip until a month ago, when I realized how badly I needed money for the mine. I wrote Conniston telling him I was coming to see him. But I went straight to Los Angeles first and got rid of that stuff to the museum and"—Kerry looked up with a grin and Gail found herself coloring—"met you, and let another month slip by.

"The other day I thought I'd better get busy. Yesterday I came down here, without letting you know I was coming; you didn't tell me you were coming, either, and proceeded to make a fool of myself all over again.

"I seem to have the knack of get-

ting in wrong, Gail. Some folks are that way. Coming down on the stage I worked up a grudge against old Conniston for not offering to sell the stones two years ago. If I had done so then there might have been some excuse for it. But there wasn't now. I had been as careless about it as he had.

"Anyhow, by the time I reached the Casa de Ayer I had a fair-sized grudge against him, and I met him with a chip on my shoulder. I demanded—*demanded*, mark you—my share of the value of the intaglios.

"THAT was where I made my fool play. If I had asked him for a settlement I probably would have received it. But I *demanded* it. And, as you may know, Colonel Conniston wasn't the man to listen to the demands of anyone, especially those of a man half his age. He went up in the air at once.

"Perhaps he had a sort of guilty feeling at having kept the intaglios as long as he had. If so, my 'impudence,' as he called it, gave him an excuse to justify himself. I was hopping mad, too, by this, and we went at it hotter and hotter for half an hour.

"I have an idea that I called him an old rascal, and I think I must have given him the impression that I thought he was holding out on me. He began to rave.

"At first he said that he expected a good offer for the gems from Conrad Gill, the diamond broker, that very evening, but he finished up by telling me that I'd never see a dollar of the money, that I had no legal hold upon him, that I was an 'insolent pup,' and that I'd better get out of the house before he threw me out.

"I don't think he really meant it, even then, but I took him at his word."

"He didn't, Kerry!" Gail cried breathlessly. "He meant to do what was just!"

Kerry nodded.

"I think so, too, now. Well, I rushed out of the room, tumbled over Dimity, and got to the front door just as Mrs. Wessels was opening it to admit the Gills. I hurried down the drive, supposing that one of them was Conrad Gill, and came to the highway. Then I stopped and began to think.

"Down in Mexico I got into the habit of carrying a pistol, and I found I had the thing in my pocket. It put the idea into my head.

"I must have been clean crazy even to think of it. And yet, believe me or not, Gail, it seemed sane and reasonable enough to me then.

"You see, I took it into my head that Conniston meant to cheat me of my share, as he said I had no legal hold upon him, and I felt sure that if the Gills got away with the stones that would be the last of them, so far as I was concerned.

"Well, I wasn't going to give up without a fight and I didn't much care whether I had the law with me or not. A man gets that way sometimes when he's seen as much as I have.

"But before I made this fool play I wanted to be sure that these men bought the intaglios. I had a pretty fair idea of the lay of the house, and I sneaked back down the drive and around to the library window.

"There was an opening between the curtains, and I got a good view of the room. I saw the Gills and Conniston. The intaglios were on the table. And old Gill had his checkbook in his hand. That was enough. I was sure they were sold, and I didn't wait any longer. And they weren't sold, after all!

"You know what happened, Gail. I suppose you'll say it was the meanest, the most idiotic thing you ever heard

of, even if I did unload the gun first. When I saw you in that car"—he broke off suddenly and covered his face with his hands—"I knew then what a fool I had been and I ran, like a spanked puppy. I don't suppose you'll undderstand, if there is anything to understand."

There was silence again.

Gail was smiling a little. Kerry had told his tale with a fine dramatic sense that made the apparently inexplicable absurdly clear and understandable to her. And he had said he didn't suppose she would understand! Her eyes danced. There wasn't an ounce of subtlety in him.

Every word he had uttered had been a flame that illumined the four square halls of his character; everything he had done had been in keeping with that bundle of impulses which she knew as Kerry O'Neil.

Suddenly she found his fine dark eyes upon her. There was in them that which made her heart leap. She began to tremble, to feel herself in terror of him.

"Gail!" he whispered huskily.

"Yes, Kerry?"

"I can't help it, girl, I've got to tell you! I can't help it!"

She waited tensely. His eyes drew her as magnets draw.

"I'm an odd cuss, Gail. I never amounted to much—don't suppose I ever shall. I've been keeping it back for weeks—wanted to get this other thing straightened out first. And now I'm wanted—by the police—for murder——" His face twisted with an inarticulate agony that wrenched the girl's heart. "I'm a low-down cuss talking to you like this now. I ought to be shot! But—oh, Lord! I can't help it, Gail—I love you!"

He caught her fiercely by the shoulders and swung her around.

"You are not laughing at me, Gail!" he whispered huskily. "I couldn't stand it if you were! Lord!" he groaned again. "I shouldn't be saying this—I don't know what I'm saying—I can't help it! Forgive me, Gail!"

But he did not let her go. The strength of his hands held her fast, and Gail was content that it should be so. Her fear of him was gone. Happiness thrilled her as a burst of song. She wanted to press his head to her breast, to run her hands through his hair.

"Help it!" she echoed, with a smile. "I don't want you to, Kerry."

MINUTES later Gail gently disengaged herself from Kerry's arms.

"I must go," she whispered. "They may be looking for me."

"Let 'em look," Kerry grinned. "I've found you!"

"But I must, dear!" the girl insisted firmly. "I'll come tomorrow night and bring you more food."

Kerry grew thoughtful.

"Better not, now that I come to think of it," he said. "I don't want you brought into it, Gail. Aiding and abetting, you know."

Gail smiled. She knew better than to tell him that she couldn't get into it any deeper than she was already.

"There won't be any danger," she went on. "The inquest is to be held in the afternoon, and Bartlett and his men are going up to Los Angeles after it is over. They think you are up there. Stark is going, too."

The effect of this announcement upon Kerry was startling. He stood up, his lean face aglow, and drove his fist into the palm of his other hand.

"Great!" he exclaimed. "Just what I wanted!"

"What do you mean?"

"Bartlett and his men and Stark are going north, you say. That will leave only Mrs. Wessels and Dimity and you. What luck! I've got a hunch there's something in that li-

brary that Bartlett has missed. I'm coming up to have a look around."

Gail sprang to her feet, aghast. "You are not! Are you crazy?"

"What's wrong? Why not?"

"Someone may come! Bartlett may change his mind! A hundred things may happen! You are not coming up, Kerry!"

"Yes, I am," he said coolly.

Gail looked at him in silence. His face expressed a quality of determination she had never seen in it before, and she knew that anything she might say would be useless. A presentiment of danger oppressed her. He saw the unhappiness in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Gail, but I have to come. Being down here is getting on my nerves. I have to have action, even if it means bumping into friend Bartlett. But don't worry. I won't do that!"

"Kerry——"

"It's no use, Gail. I'm coming. I'll be there about ten o'clock. Open the library window, then go to bed. I don't want you mixed up in it."

Gail shivered a little. The beauty of the night seemed to screen a threat.

"All right, Kerry. If you've made up your mind."

He accompanied her to the foot of the trail, kissed her tenderly, and let her go.

CHAPTER XI

THE SHADOW ON THE DRIVE

THE inquest was held in the library of the Casa de Ayer the following afternoon. A lawyer had come down from the office of the district attorney, and Gail was again subjected to a grueling cross-examination that all but broke her heart.

How she maintained the sturdy front she had presented to Bartlett and the sheriff she never quite knew. Perhaps it was the flame Kerry O'Neil had kindled within her that sustained her. But maintain it she did.

Mrs. Wessels stood by her magnificently.

Nothing developed in the way of new evidence.

Stark, of course, absolutely denied having been near the place at the hour of the murder; and when the Gills and Bartlett had given their evidence, and long before the jury had gone out, it became pitilessly clear to Gail how completely Mrs. Wessels' statement had been discounted.

The jury at last filed out to their deliberations, deeply conscious of the gravity of their office.

Gail hadn't the slightest doubt as to what the verdict would be, but the suspense of waiting for it harrowed her afresh. It came fifteen minutes later.

"We, the jury, find that Philip Conniston died of valvular lesion of the heart and that, in our opinion, his death was hastened by strangulation, apparently at the hands of Kerry O'Neil."

The grave tones of the foreman as he pronounced the verdict were like a knife thrust in Gail's heart. She could feel Stark's eyes upon her, cold, ironical, triumphant. Mrs. Wessels led her from the room, fighting hard to keep back the tears.

They had tea together in the kitchen. Dimity did not join them. Gail had seen little of him all day. There had been no opportunity to question him. Indeed, he had seemed to avoid her.

It was a silent meal, and when it was over Gail escaped to the sanctuary of her room.

It was now after six, and presently the shadows began to deepen, and on the western rim there remained of the sun's golden light only a dull red glow which Gail, in her present mood,

found threatening, sullen, and sinister.

Her thoughts were of Kerry and his impending appearance at the Casa de Ayer. His insane determination to examine the library had filled her with terror that had grown upon her as the day lengthened until now she was certain that nothing but disaster could come of it.

The coroner, his jury, and the newspaper men had gone. But in the drive below were a high-powered police car, the Gills' limousine, and Stark's sleek gray roadster. Perrin had said they were leaving the Casa de Ayer after the inquest. Why didn't they go? Gail kept asking herself fretfully.

From the fact that it was only seven o'clock and that Kerry was not to arrive until ten, Gail drew little comfort. Her nerves were on edge; she could not sit still in her chair; her limbs were trembling.

She began to imagine eventualities that had not occurred to her before. Perhaps Perrin had been mistaken, or possibly Bartlett and Stark had changed their minds. An even more alarming possibility presented itself to her.

Might not Perrin, at the instigation of Bartlett, have lied to her in the hope that she might lead them to Kerry?

Then she reflected that this could not be so unless they at least made a pretense of leaving the estate.

So acute did her distress presently become that she got up and, going downstairs, passed into the patio, where she dropped onto a rustic bench beneath a wistaria vine.

A little while passed.

Suddenly Gail heard a soft footfall in the shadows in front of her. Every sense on the alert, she listened attentively, peering into the darkness ahead. A figure materialized out of the shadows, paused, came toward her. It was Dimity.

"Dimity!" she whispered.

He did not speak, but he stopped in front of her, and she got the impression that he was going to.

"What is it, Dimity? You have something to tell me?"

He nodded. "Yes, Missie. But not here—people around. In the summer-house, later on. You know it?"

Gail was shivering with excitement. "Tell me now—here! You must, Dimity! Do you know who did it?"

She had contemplated the possibility that he knew a hundred times during the last two days, but she had not really believed that he did. Now she was certain.

He gestured angrily. "Mebbe! No, I won't tell you here! 'Tain't safe. The summer-house—ssh!"

He broke off suddenly, finger to his lips; his eyes darted toward the door which gave entrance to the house from the patio. Gail stiffened in her chair. She, too, got the impression that someone was standing there, listening. Dimity looked at her sharply.

"Ten o'clock!" he whispered. "They'll be gone then!"

Quickly he turned, and with an agility surprising in one of his years dived into the shadows from whence he had come. Gail let him go. She was staring intently toward the door. Was there someone there, listening? Who could it be?

She got up and softly made her way across the patio, paused at the terrace, went on to the door, paused again, and listened.

There was no one there.

She passed into the hall. The murmur of voices came from the library, the door of which was closed; the scent of cigarette smoke faintly assailed her nostrils; but she saw no

one. Mrs. Wessels was in the kitchen.

Nevertheless, she could not rid herself of the impression that they had been watched, and she stood quite still, listening intently and peering along the shadowy hall. Who could it have been? Decker? Perhaps. But why should he disappear so quickly? Was he with the others in the library? Had he overheard Dimity? Well, it didn't matter if he had.

Then Gail reflected that she had received nothing more definite than an impression. Perhaps, after all, their senses, abnormally keen, due to the strain they were under, had deceived them.

She had no time to speculate further upon this point, for just then she heard chairs being pushed back in the library. Her heart began to race. Were they really going, at last?

On her toes she fled down the hall, rounded the newel-post, and swept up the staircase to the door of her room. She did not enter, but stood there in the shadows, peering down into the hall. The front door she could see clearly.

Bartlett, Stark, and the Gills emerged from the library and leisurely made their way toward the front door. They were chatting about the case, and much of their conversation reached Gail as she impatiently waited for them to manifest their intentions.

She heard her name and Kerry's mentioned once or twice, and there were several references to "Los Angeles." A remark about the vault came to her imperfectly, but she sensed its substance.

An expert had been sent for, he had been expected that morning, but he hadn't turned up. The remark was to the effect that he would arrive the next day.

BARTLETT would have one of his men here to meet him, Gail reflected. The thought bothered her.

An antique hall-stand stood in an alcove near the front door. Mr. Gill went to it, took down his overcoat and hat and donned them. Conrad, his son, followed his example; so did Bartlett and Stark. Chatting animatedly, they passed out into the night.

Gail ran to the window of her room. She saw the Gills get into their limousine, heard the engine roar into life. It swept around the lawn and purred down the tree-bordered drive. Bartlett followed in the police car and Stark came behind him in the gray roadster.

Not until the headlights of the three cars had vanished over the rise in the highway did Gail realize that they had indeed gone. A sob of relief broke from her lips. She looked at her wrist watch. It was just eight o'clock. The moon was rising above the ridge of the peninsula.

She would see Kerry in two hours. Thought of his coming at once thrilled and terrified her. She was eager for the sound of his voice, for the touch of his hand, but she was haunted by a presentiment of danger.

Then she shook herself vigorously. What was there to be afraid of? Bartlett and his men and Stark had gone; Mrs. Wessels, the dear soul, had announced her intention of retiring early; and Dimity——

Dimity! The thread of her thought snapped. She was to meet him at the summer-house at ten. He had intimated that he knew who had killed Colonel Conniston.

She recalled the joy with which she had received the intimation down in the patio a few minutes ago. But now, after even this short interval, she wasn't so sure. Dimity's mind was unbalanced; what could he have discovered, unless——

Her suspicions of him crowded back her mind. This might be an attempt to throw dust into her eyes, engineered by Stark, perhaps. She did not know what to think. If only it were ten o'clock.

Ten! Kerry was to be at the library window, which she would presently open, at that hour. He would come by way of the cliff trail which led up to the summer-house.

Dimity would see him!

How the little man would react Gail hadn't the remotest idea; but the situation, should it come about, might contain all the elements of disaster.

She must meet Kerry on the beach and, if he still insisted on coming up to the Casa de Ayer, bring him by way of another trail which she had found that morning. And while he was in the library she would keep Dimity in the summer-house. Her plan seemed sound. It did not occur to her to open the window, then go to bed, as Kerry had so largely commanded her.

Gail had been sitting by the window for an hour or so when, quite suddenly, she thought she heard a faint s o u n d, an indistinguishable sound, in the landing outside, or in the hall below.

She went to the door and peered out into the shadowy landing and down into the hall. The sound was not repeated, and she attributed it to the breeze outside or to the surge of the tide on the beach. A light, she noticed, shone beneath the door of Mrs. Wessels' room. Evidently the housekeeper was about to retire.

A little later, toward half-past nine it was, Gail went downstairs, it being her intention to descend to the beach at once and intercept Kerry before he climbed the trail.

Purposing to leave the house by way of the window in the library, she entered the latter room. A red glow in the grate pulsed against the dark interior. Conniston's body had been removed.

Gail shivered a little as she glanced around. There was a coldness, a stillness, a sinister something about the room that chilled her blood. She went to the draperies that concealed the window and drew them back.

Her hand was upon the bolt which had played so tremendous a part in the affair of the early morning before, when she stopped suddenly. Her body grew tense and the color ebbed from her cheeks.

There was a pool of moonlight upon the drive, and athwart it lay the shadow of a man; a tall lean man, whose body was invisible against a mass of shrubbery close by.

Gail went sick for a moment; then she drew a long breath that steadied her. She did not move. She did not dare to. The room was in darkness, but a movement of the curtains might attract the attention of the man outside. She must wait; she must think. Her intuitions were unusually keen, and she felt sure that the man whose shadow she saw was neither Kerry nor Dimity.

Could it be Decker? The shadow suggested his lean figure, but Decker was on his way to Los Angeles; supposed to be. Had Bartlett dropped him and sent him back with instructions to keep his eyes open and himself out of sight? Or, reverting to her fears of an hour or two before, was this departure a pretense, and had Bartlett and his men come back secretly?

If they had, it must be in the hope that she might lead them to Kerry!

Just then the shadow moved slowly on. It vanished. She hadn't been seen!

FIGHTING down the panic that threatened to overwhelm her, Gail thought rapidly. It was nine-thirty now. Kerry might be on his way up

to the house. He would run into the arms of whoever was out there. She must prevent it. How? If she stole out to meet him and she was seen she would be followed.

But she must risk it. There was nothing else she could do. If she was followed, at least Kerry would have a better chance of getting away than if he stumbled into them unawares.

Gail drew back the bolt and let the curtain fall. Then she quietly hurried into the hall and along it to the patio door, which she unbolted. The center of the patio was white with moonlight, but toward the sides were deep shadows and, picking her way through these, Gail came to the path which skirted the cliff.

She stopped beneath a cypress tree and listened. Silence. Turning, she fled down the path and drew near to the summer-house. Dimity was not yet there. She crept to the head of the trail, stopped, and listened again.

And just then she heard the crack of a stick and the rustle of grass in the orchard beyond the cypress trees at her left. Decker, if it were he who had seen her, was after her!

Gail was panic-stricken. Should she stay where she was or go back or go on? The rustling grew louder. She could distinguish the tread of feet. Better go on. With a sob in her throat she swept down the cliff trail, reached the beach, flew along it, dived into the shadows flung by the overhang of the cliff.

Keeping within the shadows cast by the cliff, Gail plunged wildly down the beach, sobbing hysterically, stumbling over drifted sand and smooth round boulders. Her breath came heavily, tearing agonizingly at her throat.

If only she could see Kerry! She must find him! He must have his chance to get away. She kept on, her feet dragging in the loose sand.

A figure loomed up in the shadows in front of her. It was a man. He came toward her. It was Kerry.

"Gail!" he whispered. His arms closed about her.

For a moment she clung to him, trembling. She could not speak. The thud of her heart against his alarmed him.

"What's wrong, Gail?"

"Decker!" she gasped. "He came back! He's after me. You must get away; he'll see you! Quick, Kerry!"

Instead, he drew her into the mouth of a shallow cave in the cliff wall.

"Now, tell me!" he whispered.

She did so, in a hasty word or two, and implored him to go.

"Let him come!"

"Are you crazy!" Gail stormed. "If he finds you here——"

She broke off suddenly; her hand tightened on Kerry's arm. There had come a soft footfall on the sand. They stood rigid, staring at each other. Gail was white to the lips. Kerry's lean body tensed; there was a sort of panther-like grace about him.

"Stick up your hands, O'Neil! And come out of that!"

It was Decker.

Silence again.

Neither of them moved. They could not see the man outside. Probably he could not see them, but he knew they were there. The cave was small. If he began to shoot a bullet would find one of them!

"Come out of it, O'Neil, or I'll rip you open!" Decker roared. "You, too, Hollister! Sharp about it!"

Gail was in despair. Was this to be the end of her strivings on Kerry's behalf? She looked at him piteously. His mouth was drawn into a thin hard line, but there was a ghost of a grin in his dear eyes. He nodded reassuringly and, raising his hands above his head, indicated that she should do likewise.

"Coming, Decker," he drawled.

His coolness amazed Gail.

He stepped out of the cave, hands aloft. Gail followed him. Decker detached himself from the cliff wall and stood before them, automatic leveled at Kerry. His small eyes glinted maliciously.

"Well, O'Neil, I've got you!"

"So it seems," Kerry agreed. "What are you going to do with me?"

Decker laughed unpleasantly. His hand went to a pocket and Gail heard the clink of metal. The gun wavered a little. It happened suddenly then. Gail gave a little scream.

Kerry had taken a short step forward and appeared to stumble over a stone at his feet. But instead of falling, his body twisted lithely aside, his palm came down in a terrific sweep, and he struck the weapon from Decker's hand.

CHAPTER XII

THE INVERTED NUMERALS

FOR a moment the two men were held apart by the abruptness of this equalization of their fighting resources. And then their bodies collided with a thud, interlocked; and, losing their footing on the treacherous sand, they went down in a whirling tangle of arms and legs.

Gail saw nothing clearly. A mist seemed to float before her eyes.

Nevertheless, she sensed acutely the intensity of the struggle. So closely were the two men interlocked as they writhed on the sand that their arms and legs seemed to be the members of a single body. She had an impression of snarling hate on Decker's part; of a cold and grim fury on Kerry's.

The thud of human flesh, grunts of pain, an oath or two, the heavy breathing of racked bodies, came to her as from a distance. The thing was savage, abysmal; they seemed to have slipped back into the beginnings of time. The sweet tranquillity of the night was like a fairy's garment rent and torn.

It stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Gail saw one of the men stagger to his feet and stare down at his prostrate opponent. The issues at stake crowded back into her mind, and she shut her eyes, afraid to look.

But when she opened them again she saw to her relief that the victor was Kerry. Decker lay still. Kerry was on his knees beside Decker, stuffing a handkerchief into his mouth and fastening it in place with another one. The handcuffs which Decker had intended for Kerry the latter now clamped on his wrists, and secured his legs with a belt Decker had worn around his waist.

A leap of fury in the man's eyes indicated his return to consciousness.

Kerry stood up again and looked at Gail. His lips and nose were bloody, but he was grinning exultantly and Gail grinned back at him. Kerry was hers and she was proud of him! But she must get him away before anyone else arrived on the scene.

Kerry, however, had other plans in his head.

"Come on, Gail!" he said curtly.

Seizing her by the hand, he began to hurry her along the beach toward the trail.

"You are not going up there?" she gasped.

"I certainly am! I'll never have a better chance. Come on!"

Gail's eyes blazed.

"You reckless fool!" she cried scathingly. "I came down here to warn you and you tell me you are going up there; right into their arms!"

Kerry was astonished.

"Decker is safe enough," he protested. "You didn't see anyone else. Why shouldn't I go?"

Her flash of temper died down.

"You dear fool, Kerry!" she cried

softly. "How shall I ever keep you! Don't you understand? If Decker came back mightn't Bartlett and Stark have come back too? Mightn't their departure be nothing but a trick to get me to lead them to you? I believe it is!" she added, with a backward glance at the writhing figure of Decker.

Kerry began to grin again.

"Maybe," he admitted.

"Do you want them to take you?"

"I don't believe I do; not before I've had a look around, anyhow."

"Yet you say you are going where they are?"

"I want to see if you are right."

She frowned impatiently. "You don't think I am, then?"

His grin became a chuckle.

"I shouldn't be surprised if you were, Gail."

Her eyes widened with distress, and he became serious instantly, taking her hand in his.

"It amounts to this, Gail," he said earnestly: "I can't hide on the peninsula much longer. I doubt if I could get away right now. Bartlett will have his men strung across it, whether he thinks I am in Los Angeles or not. He can't afford to take any chances. I am a desperate character! They've been combing the ridge all day; nearly had me a couple of times this afternoon.

"It's only a matter of hours before they rout me out, and I want to have a look around that house first. I can't get it out of my head that I'll turn up something of value. Bartlett may get me, but there's an even chance that he won't.

"I'm going to risk it, anyhow. If he does get me, it'll be only a few hours sooner, anyhow. You see what I mean? I've simply got to go, dear."

THERE was sense in what he said, as Gail realized. But the thought of his being taken now, even though capture ultimately was inevitable, terrified her. As for his idea that he might find evidence which had escaped Bartlett, she didn't think much of it. But she saw that he had made up his mind. Nothing she might say would move him.

Gail thought for a moment longer.

"Will you promise not to give yourself up, and not to let Bartlett take you, unless you can't help it?" she begged.

"Yes, Gail."

She looked back at Decker, who was still torturing the sand with his writhings.

"Come on, then."

They started down the beach at a trot, keeping well within the shadows cast by the cliff. Kerry was for turning up the trail by which Gail had descended the cliff, but she kept on.

"Not that way. There's another trail below the patio. It's much steeper, but it will give us a better chance of keeping out of their sight."

"If they are t h e r e," Kerry chuckled. "Lead on, Cap."

They came to the other trail a minute or so later. It was more difficult of ascent than the first, as Gail had said, and they were obliged to labor up it with the utmost of caution.

Gail was in front. When she reached the top of the cliff she bent double, passed swiftly over a patch of moonlight on the edge of the cliff, and plunged into the shadow of a great cypress at a corner of the patio. Kerry joined her.

The Casa de Ayer was as darkly portentous as when Gail had left it. A glimmer of light shone from the hall, but the rear rooms were in darkness. Moonlight fell on it weirdly, and Gail was possessed by the fantastic notion that an invisible shadow lay upon and around the house; a shadow that forbade them entrance, and that it was the shadow of the man who had built it and the shadow

of the man who had died within its walls.

Then she heard Kerry whispering:

"There's no one here. Bartlett hasn't come back. Let's go!"

Gail cautiously led him across the patio, taking advantage of every scrap of a shadow that offered them cover, with a dexterity that brought a low chuckle from Kerry and would have won the admiration of an Indian trapper. They crept into the house.

It seemed to Gail like entering a tomb; and when she found herself in the library her sensations were those of one who stands in the presence of the dead. She closed the door and made sure that the curtains covered every inch of the window; then she switched on the light. The somber interior leaped out at them. Gail shivered. Kerry glanced appreciatively around him.

"Hurry with what you are going to do!" Gail whispered anxiously. "And don't speak so loud. Mrs. Wessels may hear you."

Following one possessed of a 'hunch' is a nervous proceeding at best. Gail hadn't the remotest idea what Kerry was going to do now that he was here. Indeed, for a minute or so it appeared as if Kerry didn't himself.

He stood in the center of the floor, peering about him and frowning at the shadows beyond the range of the lamp. Gail's nerves were on edge. She could not keep still. A feeling of catastrophe took hold of her. She wished Kerry were anywhere but here.

"Oh, do hurry!" she pleaded.

"Don't get excited, old dear."

He went to the table and sat down behind it. So far as Gail could remember the articles upon it were not altered in any particular. Pen and ink, writing pad, the Venetian mirror, and the lens were still there, as they had been when she found Conniston's body forty odd hours before. The two chairs were still drawn up in front of the table, also.

Kerry studied the top of the table, taking care to keep his hands off the polished surface. Then, covering his fingers with a handkerchief, he opened its two drawers. They were stacked with bundles of letters, documents, and notes in the colonel's wretched handwriting, confined by broad elastic bands.

Kerry took several packages out of one of the drawers, spread them on the desk, and began to go through them thoroughly. The neatness with which they were arranged suggested Bartlett's methodical hands, and Kerry was careful to return each bundle to the drawer exactly as he had found it.

He worked swiftly, but the papers were many and nearly twenty minutes elapsed before he got through the first drawer. He finished the second some fifteen minutes later and stood up, frowning.

"Nothing there," he muttered.

"Did you expect there would be?" Gail demanded fretfully. "Hasn't Bartlett been through them already?"

"There might have been," was the cheerful response. "Don't worry, Gail. There's no one here."

Kerry picked up the Venetian hand mirror, looked at it critically, and put it down again. Then he went to the vault, which was some six or eight feet away from the backs of the two chairs drawn up in front of the table, switched on the drop light, and stared at the door earnestly for a moment. From the vault he turned to the fireplace and dropping on his knees poked among its dying embers.

What he expected to find there Gail hadn't the remotest idea, and, in spite of her fears, she smiled as she watched him perform the solemni-

ties of the detective of fiction. But Kerry was too deeply absorbed in his investigations to observe their effect on Gail.

Perhaps they were not as unproductive as they seemed and, perhaps, like the detective of fiction, he was concealing whatever discoveries he had made until the psychological moment for their disclosure should arrive.

He now commenced a tour of the room and examined minutely each article of furniture in its turn.

By the time another ten minutes had passed Gail was frantic with anxiety. The smallest sound sent a shiver of terror through her and continuously she listened for the tread of footsteps in the hall. Kerry's nonchalance contributed to her misery. She felt that she must scream if he did not quickly go.

As a relief to her feelings she began to wander around the room. Thus it happened that presently she stopped at the table. Hardly aware of what she was doing, she picked up the Venetian mirror, stared at it in a puzzled way and started to put it down again. But before she had completed the act she caught the reflection in the mirror and her hand was arrested.

Then she stood the mirror on its end, handle up. The corner of the writing pad was reflected in the glass. Her expression enlivened; a look of absorption crept into her eyes.

"Kerry!" she whispered. "Come here, quickly!"

He ran to her side.

"Look into the glass!"

He did so.

"What do you see?"

"Figures," he muttered? "Reflected from the blotter. '32, 71, 49, 18,' I think they are."

He looked at Gail, frowning a little.

"It's an awful scrawl. Somebody wrote 'em down quick and blotted 'em quick; see how thick and smeared the strokes are. That isn't the colonel's seven; he put a curl in his horizontal stroke."

Gail had a queer light in her eyes.

"What do you think they mean, Kerry?" she whispered tensely.

For a moment he did not get her meaning; then his dark eyes blazed suddenly.

"Lord!" he whistled. "The numerals of a combination — the vault!"

"If only it should be!" Gail breathed. "We'd have a real clue! Try it, Kerry!"

Kerry bent back the corner of the blotter and neatly tore it off.

"Little bright eyes!" he chuckled. "I came up here to hunt clues and you beat me to it!"

"You shouldn't have torn the blotter!" Gail expostulated. "Bartlett——"

"The devil with Bartlett!" said Kerry O'Neil.

He ran to the vault and spun the dial. If these figures were the combination, as they devoutly hoped, there was no indication as to whether the first turn of the dial should be made to the right or to the left. Kerry turned to the left, carefully setting the 32 to the indicator; then to the right, 71; to the left, 49; to the right, 18.

Would it open? Gail held her breath as Kerry's fingers closed on the handle. It held! There was silence for a moment.

"Try starting from the right instead of the left," Gail said, in a small voice.

Kerry twirled the dial again. His hand was trembling as he turned to the right and stopped at 32; then to the left, 71; to the right, 49; to the left, 18.

Gail endured an agony of suspense

as Kerry gripped and swung upon the handle.

"Kerry!" she cried.

It had turned.

He gave a little shout of triumph and opened the door. They entered the vault.

There were many shelves and drawers, several files, a few account books, and great bundles of documents that probably appertained to the Conniston collection. Gail drew out two shallow trays. They were lined with white satin and they were empty. She looked at Kerry significantly.

"Gone," he said.

Gail nodded.

"Of course."

They lingered for a minute or two in the vault, pulling out a drawer here and there. None of them was fitted with locks. Then they went back into the library. Kerry looked at the triangle of blotter in his hand.

"Not so much of a clue after all," he said moodily. "The figures are too scrawly to be recognizable as the handwriting of any particular person. I make the same kind of seven myself. Still, it may help."

Gail wasn't listening to him. Her face had whitened to the lips. She caught him fiercely by the arm.

"Kerry!" she whispered. "There's someone coming!"

They fastened their eyes upon the door. Footfalls, soft and secretive, came from the hall behind it. Gail whirled upon Kerry, pushed him toward the window.

"Go, quickly!" she whispered. "The window—it's open!"

He looked at her beseechingly.

"I can't leave you—I can't—like this——"

Gail dug her fingers cruelly into his arm.

"You must! You promised! You'll make it all the worse for me!"

He hesitated for a moment, his eyes entreating her to let him stay. Then he turned and dived between the curtains. Somehow, Gail got the vault door shut; she hadn't time to turn the handle.

The footsteps paused outside the library door. Gail pulled herself together and waited. She could hear the watch on her wrist ticking with incredible loudness. The window curtains grew still again.

The door opened. A man entered. It was Norman Stark.

CHAPTER XIII

UNDERGROUND

HE stopped abruptly when he saw Gail. She stood by the table, one hand resting lightly on it. Her head was tilted a little to one side, and her eyes were cool and inquiring in their expression. The light from the lamp brought out all the latent fire in her hair; a faint glow suffused her cheeks.

"It's a trap, after all," she was thinking, bitterly. "Perrin lied to me."

But the trap had been clumsily sprung, and the bird had flown; unless Bartlett had netted it outside. He hadn't, she was sure. Kerry had *promised* and he was clever enough to outwit a dozen policemen.

"I must keep him here until Kerry is gone!" she reflected desperately.

The curtains behind which he had disappeared tugged at her eyes like magnets, but she kept her gaze upon Stark. There was suspicion and perplexity in his face. His eyes darted around the room, met hers again. And then she saw that he carried a pistol.

"Are you looking for game, Mr. Stark?" she smiled, in a friendly way.

His heavy face reddened. "I

thought I heard some one moving around," he muttered.

"Probably you did. I've been here for some time."

His eyes narrowed. "Are you alone? I thought I heard voices."

Gail laughed. "Voices! Can't you see for yourself?" Then, taking a chance: "Perhaps you heard me talking with Dimity. Won't you put your pistol away?"

Stark dropped the weapon into a pocket. The suspicion lingered, in his eyes, however. Kerry must be descending the cliff by this time, Gail thought.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Looking for clues."

Stark grunted sardonically.

"Find any?"

"I didn't expect to; you were so careful," Gail drawled.

A tigerish expression leaped into his eyes. "You are still pretending to believe that rot!"

Gail changed the subject.

"Perrin told me you were going north."

He calmed down at this. "That was my intention, but I turned back."

"Did you? I wonder why."

Stark laughed unpleasantly. The sound rasped on Gail's raw nerves. He moved toward her with that swift, catlike gait by which she had identified him as the man she had seen in the moonlight. The suspicion had left his eyes; their expression terrified her.

"I wanted to see you, Gail Hollister."

She fell back, trembling. His eyes burned and his hands reached out toward her. The strength oozed from her limbs. She could not move. He seemed a mountain of a man, bent on destroying her. His hand touched her arm. Ugh! Those hands! That still figure she had found on the floor!

"Mr. Stark!"

"You little peach!" he whispered fatuously.

Gail screamed. Not at the touch of Stark's hands upon her arm, however, but at the sudden appearance of Kerry from behind the curtains. He had not gone, after all!

His lean face was white with fury and as Stark whirled upon him, fumbling at his pistol pocket, he hurled himself upon the man.

Stark reeled, but recovered himself in a flash, and the pistol leapend into his hand. Before he could use it Kerry struck him savagely on the mouth. Stark dropped the pistol, bellowed with pain and spat out a broken tooth. He rushed at Kerry, who stepped lightly aside.

Kerry's fist shot out like a ram. It caught Stark flush on the point of the jaw and he toppled back into the grate and lay still.

Gail had backed to the wall near the door. Kerry sprang toward her.

"That beast, Gail! He *touched* you!"

She drew her hand across her eyes. Now that Kerry was here it seemed like an evil dream.

"Oh, do go, Kerry!" she cried fearfully. "Someone else may come."

Even as she spoke, her eyes, dilating with terror, stared over Kerry's shoulder.

"Pretty neat, O'Neil. Now put up your hands and keep 'em up!"

It was Bartlett.

He had stepped into the room from behind the window curtains as Kerry had done a minute or two before. In his hand was a pistol which he leveled at Kerry, and his cold eyes flickered a little as they rested on the young man.

"Put 'em up, O'Neil!" he said again.

Kerry obeyed reluctantly. His

dark eyes met the deputy's coolly, calculatingly. He did not speak.

"Come toward the center of the room where I can see you. That's far enough. Stay where you are, Miss Hollister!"

GAIL was sick at heart with this disastrous turn of events and she was only too glad to hide her misery in the shadows near the wall. There was silence for a moment and Bartlett surveyed his captive with interest.

"Well, O'Neil, you've made us a lot of trouble. You might as well have given yourself up at first."

"Think of the fun I'd have missed," Kerry drawled.

"Think of the fun you are going to have," Bartlett responded dryly. His words were prophetic. "That was a nasty one you handed Stark."

The latter was showing signs of returning to consciousness.

"It was," Kerry admitted. "There is plenty more where it came from, too."

Gail had herself in hand again and was thinking rapidly. She had the faculty of grasping all the possibilities of the situation at a glance, and she saw a chance whereby Kerry might get away, if only she acted quickly enough and Kerry had the wit to follow her.

Stark had left the door ajar. Gail stood well within the shadows beyond the circle of light cast by the lamp, and so near the door that, without moving, she had been able to take the key out of the lock unobserved. Immediately behind her was the light switch. Bartlett stood ten feet or so in front of Kerry. Near Kerry was a chair.

Her plan was to divert Bartlett's attention from Kerry for an instant, and in that instant switch out the light, fling open the door, and hurl herself into the hall. If Kerry was quick-witted enough to topple the chair in front of Bartlett—who would be confused by the darkness and the suddenness of it all, and rush after her into the hall, whereupon she would endeavor to lock the library door while Bartlett was tumbling over the chair—her plan might succeed.

It all depended on Kerry. There was something about the nonchalant pose of his body that suggested watchful waiting.

Gail thought he would seize the first opportunity that presented itself.

"What were you doing here?" Bartlett demanded of Kerry.

"Looking for clues," Kerry responded airily.

"Find any?" Bartlett asked Gail, as Stark had five minutes or so before.

"We did, Mr. Bartlett!" Gail said promptly.

The deputy looked at her ironically.

"Did you, now?"

"Yes," Gail prattled on. "We found that the Conniston intaglios really are gone!"

"Wasn't that clever of you!" Bartlett mocked.

Gail was watching him like a cat. She saw Kerry's shoulders stiffen a little.

"I thought so, too," she agreed brightly. "Look, we opened the vault!"

Bartlett's head jerked sideways. He saw that the handle of the vault slanted and he involuntarily took a step toward it. His automatic, Gail saw, no longer covered Kerry. Her hand flashed to the switch. The lights snapped out.

"Kerry!" Gail screamed into the flooding darkness. "The chair—trip him—the door!"

She flung the door wide open, and, prompted by an instinctive sense of

danger, dropped to her knees just as Bartlett's pistol loosed a stream of lead and fire in her direction.

With charming inconsistency, it simply hadn't occurred to Gail that Bartlett might put his gun to the use for which it was intended.

But there was not time to be terrified. The thud of a falling chair punctuated the crack, crack, of Bartlett's pistol. There came another thud and an oath; then a stream of oaths. Kerry's body jack-rabbited past Gail and she hurled herself back into the hall, swinging the door to behind her.

The crack of its closing shook the house. She thrust the key into the lock and turned it just as Bartlett hurled himself upon the door and tugged savagely at the handle.

He bellowed at them furiously and a shot tore through one of the panels and sang past Kerry's head.

"This way, quickly!" Gail panted.

Kerry squeezed her hand and they raced to the front door. It was locked and bolted. There was no key in the lock.

"The patio door!" Gail sobbed.

They flew back down the hall. The patio door was open as they had left it, but as Gail thrust her head outside heavy footsteps beat on the terrace and a stout figure rolled out of the gloom. It was Peters, the village policeman. No escape that way!

Gail had half expected this, hence her reason for trying the front door first.

She drew back, slammed the door to, and bolted it. A weighty body collided with the door; a mighty fist pounded upon it.

"Open up there!" a voice roared.

Gail shrank back, in despair.

"I'm sorry, Kerry," she whispered piteously.

He put his arm around her, more disturbed by her distress than by his own plight.

"Never mind, dear!" he said huskily. "You tried darned hard, the Lord knows!"

Then his irrepressible sense of humor reasserted itself and he grinned.

"You certainly put it over Bartlett, all right!"

His face sobered again.

"I suppose it *had* to come."

But Gail was inconsolable. Her failure enraged and terrified her. She saw what impended in its darkest colors. Kerry would be arrested; the authorities would look upon the case as closed; the trial would then commence and proceed to its inevitable conclusion. She grew sick with horror at the thought of it.

Voices rang out in the patio. One of them was Bartlett's. The pounding on the door, which had not ceased since Gail bolted it, went on with fresh vigor. Someone began to hammer on the library door. Stark! was Gail's thought.

"Open up, you fools!" Bartlett roared.

"Might as well get it over with," Kerry growled. He moved toward the door.

Off the hall, near the patio door, was an alcove which Gail had noticed that morning, though she had not inspected it closely at the time. In drawing back from the patio door they had stepped into it.

As Kerry started forward, Gail's hand, groping wildly behind her, encountered the handle of another door. She clung to it with the desperation of despair. Hope came to her. The cellars of the Casa de Ayer! She had forgotten them.

"Kerry, wait!"

She drew him back into the alcove. "The cellars! There must be a way out!"

He looked at the door doubtfully.

"I'd better get it over with. It's coming, anyhow. It'll only make it all the worse!"

Gail turned on him in a fury.

"You promised! Are you going back on your word!"

O'Neil muttered beneath his breath and jerked at the door handle. The door was locked, but there was a key in the lock. He turned it and opened the door, a yawning darkness was revealed.

"I'll go down alone," he said. "You've been through enough for one night."

"Don't be an idiot!" Gail said tersely.

BEFORE he could stop her, she had pushed him aside and started down the invisible stairs. He stared after her in bewilderment. She had completely run away with the situation. The positive rôle he had always filled so gracefully had been taken away from him and he had been given the negative one to do the best he could. He followed her down, shaken a little.

The pounding on the patio door filled the house with thunder.

Gail had missed the switch at the head of the stairs, but Kerry struck a match and the tiny flame gleamed on the globe of a drop light. Gail snapped it on and the cellar was dimly revealed as a large square apartment with a wooden floor. Through the shadows against an outer wall they saw a door. Gail rushed upon it and shook it vigorously.

"It's locked!" she cried with a sob.

"There's a window!" Kerry shouted.

There were two of them, in fact; but they found them unassailably barred. They were caught as neatly as any rat that ever walked into a trap!

Gail felt as if she would collapse. Sheer nerve had carried her this far; but she had almost come to the end of her tether. Kerry had lost his grin, something he rarely parted with for very long, and his face was white and wretched.

The action of the last half hour had been so intense that until just now he had not properly realized how seriously Gail had involved herself on his behalf.

"I've brought you into an awful mess!" he groaned, running his hands through his hair. "And we haven't accomplished a thing! I should have stayed down on the beach! Why is it I always stew things up so?"

Gail was touched at his misery.

"You couldn't help it, Kerry," she told him gently.

This wasn't strictly true, as both of them very well knew.

"You are a great girl!" he mumbled huskily.

Just then heavy feet trod on the floor above. Bartlett and his men must have come in through a window, Gail thought. She stared around the cellar in despair.

"Look!" she whispered. "Another door! Over there!" Gail swept across the floor, Kerry close behind her.

It was near that corner of the cellar farthest from where they had been standing. The shadows were deep there and a large packing-case partly concealed the door. The latter was unlocked and they entered. Kerry's head struck a drop light. He turned it on and they found themselves in a small, square, windowless apartment with a sound oak floor.

The ceiling was cobwebby and the atmosphere was musty. There were several wooden lockers and many shelves upon which stood tall bottles furred with dust.

"Old Conniston's private stock," Kerry commented.

He took a step forward, tripped, and would have fallen headlong if

Gail had not caught him by the arm. Glancing down at the floor, they saw the ring of a trapdoor. It was over this that Kerry had tripped. A groove had been neatly cut out of the board beneath it, but the ring had been left upright by the one who had last used the trap.

"A trap-door!" Kerry muttered.

So well had the trap been fitted into the floor that they had to look closely to find the line of demarcation. If the ring had not been left up, they wouldn't have known the trap was there.

Gail looked at Kerry in silence. Her eyes were startled and questioning in their expression; then, as Kerry bent swiftly and lifted the trap, they filled with a dancing excitement, a sort of ecstasy, and a glowing consciousness of prophecy fulfilled.

She found herself staring down at a ladder that dropped into a fissure in the rock upon which the Casa de Ayer was built. The stench of rotting kelp rose on the salty breath of the ocean and with it came the musketry of the incoming tide.

The Mandrake

The mandrake was a root of a curious formation, shaped like the miniature image of a man. It was supposed to grow in the shadow of the gallows tree or at cross-roads, the burial place of suicides and vampires. Witches gathered the root and sold it for magical purposes.

There was only one method of uprooting it with safety. The searcher put cotton in his or her ears, and went upon the errand on a Friday before sunrise. With the seeker went a black dog, without a single white hair.

After marking the sign of the cross over the root, the man or witch, as the case might be, dug round the root till it held by the fibres, only. Then he tied the root to the tail of the dog, held a piece of meat before him and moved away.

As the dog darted forward, the root was wrenched out. Then, pierced by the human screams of agony from the mandrake, the dog dropped dead. A sweat like blood oozed from the root.

The lucky owner kept it wrapped in a white cloth in a box, bathed it every Friday, and used the bath water for medicinal purposes. Carried in the pocket, it protected one in law cases. Sometimes it was enclosed in a bottle, when it was known as a "bottle imp."

It was a special property of the devil. If you bought it you could only get rid of it by selling it for less than you gave for it. You might destroy it, hide it beneath a pile of rocks, cast it into the sea or a well, but when you got home there would be the mandrake smirking at you, crawling on the floor to greet you, or tucked away in your bed.

Several of these roots have been preserved in European museums, and have a strange uncanny resemblance to the human form, or the face, with all the features clearly defined.

The Crest

By M. G. ROBERTS

TWO men were climbing Curry Creek trail; mere sweat-stained midgets, clinging periously among scrub brush and boulders. Above them the sun glared viciously as though daring them to come further.

Wally Striker paused and wiped his sun-baked face with a crooked elbow.

"Some climb on a day like this," he panted to the older man. "Darn bad luck if he ain't hiding up in Simon's old hut after all; just that Batty Hogan stalling us——"

Dusty McGraw grinned.

"Bad luck one way, son, because you'd likely miss out on a soft job, but on th' other hand," drawlingly, "you mightn't be here for the Old Man to pin a medal on at all. Believe me, he ain't going to jist naturally give us that there stuff after the trouble he had to git it. And he's real handy with a gun."

Then for a few minutes they struggled on in silence, each busy with their own thoughts. Dusty, thinking of the business in hand; Wally's mind back with the man they'd left behind. Old Herford; *Judge* now, and Wally's self-appointed guardian ever since he'd been found, a little red-headed shaver of some eleven summers, abandoned near the Herford Ranch by a coast-bound truck. It was to him he owed his present task.

Herford, proud and anxious to carry him along in his own successful political wake, had given him the doubtful honor of bringing in Flash Ferranz, bad man and mail-robber of Carr County.

Gradually the sun dropped; a little chill breeze, presaging dusk, shifted the leaves, and the trail suddenly straightened out. Gazing over the sheer drop, they could see it appear zigzagging away below. Parallel to this, some half mile beyond, ran an easier, though perilously exposed trail which, but for the fear of Flash's gun, they could have ascended in half the time.

Grunting, Dusty pointed to a cluster of boulders midway down.

"Reckon by now the old boy ain't so sore we left him waiting there for the signal, stead o' this climb."

"Uh-huh! Two for success, one for help and——" Wally stopped abruptly. "Will you look at that, now?" he asked, indicating a torn bit of lace caught on a bush. "Now who'd you think has been traveling along this road today? Nobody just for the exercise, anyhow."

A faint frown puckered Dusty's heat-mottled brow. "Maybe," he essayed, then paused, "you know what a bird this guy was for the skirts. Probably got some dame running with him now."

NEITHER of the men looked at each other, for the incident had opened up closed pages, bringing to mind a time when Wally and Dan Herford's daughter, Kitty, had been the butt of much good-humored raillery and unconscious envy with their calf-love romance. Then suddenly she had run away with this same Flash Fer-

ranz and never been heard of since.

Slowly Wally turned over the tiny wisp of lace, watching it curl tenderly about his finger, then shook his head.

"No, this here skirt wasn't with Pete, for he's said to be located up there these two days, and this," indicating the wisp, "is just new. No dew on it yet. Dusty," he looked up sharply, "this party is out on our business! And from the looks of it, she's going to beat us to it. We got to do some hustlin'."

"Huh, just as soon she did," murmured the older man, adding hastily, after a glance at his companion's face, "that is, if it wasn't for you making good with the Big Boss."

"Thanks!"

For a moment they exchanged understanding grins, then silently began their climb again.

But now they proceeded more carefully. That bit of lace, the falling dusk, and imminence of Flash's gun invited more caution. A new angle had arisen, too; was this unknown woman out for Flash, or was she with him? A woman with a gun!

"I ain't keen on that combination," voicing their thoughts. "And now see those birds go!"

Both men halted as three birds flew by, protesting audibly.

"All that commotion ain't just for us, son; somebody's so near it ain't healthy," he continued, squatting down below the horizon line.

Wally followed suit. Some few feet ahead the trail stopped in a broad clearing, in the center of which stood a darkened cabin. Anyone in there, however, would have an almost complete view of the surrounding country. A little puff of wind, wafted up on the crest of a faint mist; below the trail faded away dimly; leaves rustled; birds were silent.

Then sharply, cutting the stillness, a shot rang out, followed by a man's hoarse cry. Wally jumped. Had Flash just killed himself? Or had this unknown woman beaten him to it? That cry sounded more like murder.

Gripping his gun, he ran stumbling toward the cabin, caution forgotten; then halted, hand on doorjamb. Silence within. He waited, breathing hard. Still silence. Cautiously he pushed, then, reassured by the continued quiet, swung open the door.

"My God!"

A woman leaned against the opposite wall, smoking gun still in hand, staring dumbly at him.

In the streak of light coming through the open door he caught the glint of bright dyed hair; the outline of a pathetically thin but attractive figure, and that same heavy perfume.

Wally wavered, held by her own motionlessness, and the fact that she made no effort to spot him; then habit prevailed.

"Put down that gun!" he barked, and she dropped it where she stood.

Cautiously he advanced and, still covering her, kicked the weapon into the opposite corner. Then it was, that, for the first time, he noticed the form of a man prone in the back room, the upturned soles of his riding boots halfway through the door. So she had beaten him to it after all!

"Faded?" he stated, rather than asked.

"Ought to be," she shrugged.

And even to Wally's unsuspecting ears there was a faint hint of triumph in her voice. It made him pause. Even in a country where women grew hard, this one seemed unnaturally calm under the circumstances. Still, she was a woman, and he so wanted to ease the way for her.

"You potted him?" he insinuated,

"He came for you and you got him first?"

But she would not take the hint.

"No, I came up here to get him." There was a husky burr to her voice that gripped him, "He was quittin' me cold with the goods—going with Rosa Gianella—leaving me, his wife, flat. So I potted him."

Wally shifted. Somehow her cool nonchalance annoyed him. Was she an utter fool or what was her game? Killing her case of self-defense like this and not caring. His mind harked back to the bit of torn lace and lingering perfume, and gradually he began to understand.

This was Flash's wife up from San Pueblo way—this little thin creature—whom Flash had dragged around from café to dive, degraded and finally deserted!

No wonder he knew that café scent! No wonder she had finally rebelled, seeking her own vengeance while there was yet time.

In that brief moment Wally found himself wishing that he had not arrived when circumstantial evidence demanded that he charge her with the crime.

And still she stood, motionless. What was her game? Had she an ace somewhere? he wondered, even as he pulled his flash and faced her.

Then the full portent of her silence dawned upon him, for there, standing before him, the same, despite rouge-riddled face and dyed hair, was Kitty Herford! The Old Man's daughter!

"Kitty!"

He drew back dismayed.

"Sure. I knew you the first drop," she laughed. "Suppose Dad sent you up to get him?"

Her gray eyes were unscared, but that laugh was a mistake. It was too shrill. "Came a bit late, didn't you?"

Wally rumpled his red head, bewildered.

"Yes, but I never thought of you still being with him, and now——"

"And now," she interrupted. "What are you going to do about it?"

Still riding on the crest of her excitement, she quite obviously counted on her identity to save her from any further consequences of her act through Wally's hands.

He paused, shifting miserably. In the ensuing silence, dark figures crept from corners; the flash struck sharply on her pointed face; glinting gold hair flickered against broken window pane and on the soles of those two riding boots upturned menacingly beyond.

It was tough luck having to bring Kitty before her own father for murder; a poor return for all he had done for him, but——

"I'm sorry, Kitty; you should have waited a coupla hours and I'd have turned the trick for you, but as it is——"

"Wally! Don't! For God's sake! You can't—— You'd have shot him yourself, after all I've been through! And—oh, don't—not before Dad!"

For the first time the real danger of her situation seemed to dawn on her, and her mask dropped, revealing a piteous terror.

"I know I hate it more than you, Kitty, but he—he's waitin' for me to give the signal for success."

He realized now what he was up against; duty and honor against his love and gratitude to her father; and perhaps, too, a memory of their youth. Hardest of all, she knew it; already her tone was changing.

She was facing him now, eyes dilated, hands spread, the whole pitiful little figure supplicating.

"Oh, Wally! How can you? Just when we've found each other again! Or—or have you forgotten?"

Forgotten! Funny word to use after the way she'd treated him.

"Small chance!" he growled, furious at not denying her.

"Well, then," warily, "why can't it be just suicide?"

"It wasn't," he countered, refusing to meet her eyes.

"Then self-defense?" she persisted.

STILL he shook his head.

"Can't be done, Kitty. It—it wasn't suicide, and we know it wasn't self-defense. I—I couldn't swear to either in court."

That stopped her.

"Oh," she whispered, eyes wide, "it will mean a trial, won't it? And before Dad, too!" Then with growing hysteria: "Wally, you've got to help me. Be a sport. You're the only one who knows."

And there they stuck. Wally couldn't make her understand that his duty came before their own feelings. The fact that he could think of bringing her before her own father, refuse to perjure himself for her, meant, in her eyes, that he no longer cared.

While the cabin darkened so that only their white faces, shifting hands, and two boot soles glimmered in the flashlight's ray, the boy and girl battled for their rights. One for freedom and romance; the other for the empty glory of duty well done.

But in the end, as inevitably he must, his heart betrayed him. She had had such a hard time since leaving the Ranch. At first she had not known Flash for what he was, and when, on discovering it, she had tried to run away, he had beaten her badly. He did it quite often, she admitted reluctantly.

"He doesn't bother me much now, except when I'm needed for some dirty trick or other," she continued, to his questioning. "It's only so I don't show him up that he keeps me at all. From the first month there's always been women, all the time, but this last—*him* to leave *me*—after all he's made me stand for!"

For a moment she seemed to forget her present danger in living over some of those unmentioned slights of the past, then a movement from Wally recalled her.

As she looked at him, her face gradually softened, and she came toward him slowly, hands out:

"Wally, please."

Suddenly she seemed the girl he knew seven years ago.

"Please, for Dad's sake, if not for mine. It would kill him. Can't you?"

She was quite close now; the nearness of her—the hands half touching his. It was more than he could stand. For one instant he stood rigid, then caught her to him.

"Kitty! God knows I've no right; that I'm a yeller dawg, but—but what do you want me to do? I'm breaking every rule your father ever taught me, but you've won."

"And I——oh, Wally——"

Her lips searched his, held them.

And so they stood for a long minute, while Dusty McGraw, getting more and more impatient, finally abandoned his vigil behind the bushes and began a cautious advance toward the silent hut.

Presently, with a little smile, Kitty stepped back.

"And you will, Wally? See, it's so easy; just the gun in his hand, your whistle, and you've got me, and Flash—and you've not upset Dad. You know, even for duty, he'd feel sore at you for pulling me before the whole county."

So she talked, bolstering up his doubts, egging him on, the while they entered the back room, stood for an easy minute over the prostrate form,

and finally laid the telltale gun in his hand.

Then it was done and they stood together gazing at the outline of what had once been Flash Ferranz—the girl, whose life he had ruined, and the boy whose success his death had 'made'. Something of the irony of it must have struck Kitty, for suddenly she spoke:

"You know, he ain't never had a chance, Flash. Always round those dumps." Then more briskly: "Still, that's done, and now——"

Abruptly she stopped, staring wild-eyed at the entrance.

Cold with premonition, Wally also turned and his jaw dropped. For there, in the doorway, stood Dusty McGraw, surveying them from behind a leveled gun! How long had he been there? Wally wondered. How much had he seen or heard? His answer came soon enough.

"Ye-ah, darned well done," sneered Dusty, "and now for the reckoning," he mimicked. "Hands up!"

"Listen, Dusty," Wally began, "you don't understand." But the other interrupted:

"That's enough from you, Kid. I understand enough to know that the first real job the Old Man ever give you, you fall down on like a yeller cur becauase a skirt plays 'cat's eye' with you."

"Dusty! Dusty McGraw!" cried the girl, recognizing. "Don't you remember me? Have you forgotten?"

"No, I ain't." He threw her a quick glance. "You're the Old Man's girl, who threw him down for a black-eyed gringo. And now you're making the Kid, who's been his best bet ever since, double-cross him and prove that nothin' he ever did was worth the effort. A quitter, that's what you are. Afraid to take your medicine now. And pulling him"—jerking his head—"into the same hole."

He paused, breathing hard. For the first time for many years Dusty had given way to his feelings and they were riding him hard.

"But, Dusty——" Again she began, but he waved her aside.

"And now I've got the nice job of pullin' *both* of you." His voice was aggrieved. "Accessory to the case, son," he added.

"Dusty, for God's sake!"

Forgetting the gun, Wally sprang forward. A bullet whizzed past his ear.

"Not so fast. Not so fast, young feller," the old fellow adjurred, eyeing them contemplatively. "But as you both seem so upset about it, I'll tell you what I will do. I'll give you one more chance, son. Either you pick up that gun and bring her in proper," pointing to Kitty, "like you should, or I'll call the Judge now."

Slowly with his free hand he raised a whistle to his mouth, then waited.

"Well, folks—which is it?"

A minute passed. Inside all was quiet; the two figures standing together motionless; the still body prone behind, and shrunken little McGraw facing them—testing.

Then very quietly Wally spoke, moving away from her, eyes averted:

"Thanks, Dusty; I'm glad you gave me this chance; showed me just what I was going to do. You've saved me from breaking every code I've believed and lived by up to until now, and," hesitating, "if you'll take my gun, I'll remove the evidence from Flash's hand, bring in my prisoners, and resign."

"Wally, you!"

It was the girl again, fury and fear catching at her voice.

"You ain't going to give me up, after all?"

Then turning to Dusty:

"Listen, Dusty, you mustn't make him—you don't understand, else you'd see our side."

She made as though to move toward him, but the little man waved her back.

"There ain't but one side to anything, and that's my side."

Silence for a long, long minute, while the full portent of his words sank deep. Then with a little moan the girl dropped to the floor.

"Please, Dusty."

She paused, stifling her sobs, breath indrawn, hands held out.

"Nobody's ever given me a square deal. Flash played crooked with me always. Please, Dusty."

The words trailed to a mere whisper, but still the little man continued to chew reflectively, almost as though he had forgotten her existence. Presently he spoke:

"Well, son, time's pretty near up. Shall I whistle?"

Silence again, with the girl on the floor sobbing softly; Dusty hunched up on the deal table, sitting in judgment, and Wally, convicted by his heart, swallowing hard.

Then from the background came a faint scraping noise. No one stirred. Again it came, but this time Wally made for his gun, lying beside Dusty. Dusty's hand shot to his hip, head rigid, eyes sweeping the room. Then his face, beneath its tan, blanched; his eyes popped. Automatically, the others turned, then gasped.

For there, in the doorway, half revealed in the flashlight's circle of light, was Flash Ferranz! He had crawled painfully forward, and now, resting on one arm, blood-soaked, shirt hanging, he surveyed them maliciously. In his left hand waved the gun Wally had so thoughtfully left there!

And so, for what seemed an age, they stood fascinated by that gun pointing at them—Wally's gun—in the dying man's hand, for there was no doubt he was dying.

Already the face was livid, immobile, save for lips pulled back tight in a vacant grin. Even his eyes gazed sightlessly, already dead. Yet he must have seen, heard and understood at last to have made this gigantic effort.

Something, some fleeting expression, seemed struggling for life; some element of shame, contrition, perhaps remorse; for suddenly just a fleeting glimpse of tenderness burned through the fog of death. His crimson-stained figure swayed, gasping for breath:

"Kate—I—I ain't done much good livin' "—his voice came gratingly, in jerks, the words blurred together unrecognizably — "but— a — square deal—now——" He halted, to cough nastily, and then, before Dusty's gun was out, there came a spurt of flame —a gurgling intake. Flash Ferranz was dead.

TEN minutes later Dusty McGraw raised the whistle to his lips and gave the signal for success to an anxious old man down on the lower trail.

"Well, son," he exulted, "I'm sure proud to blow those two whistles, 'cause the old Judge was real curious to find out if you'd turn yeller when you found out Kitty was with him."

Wally stared.

"Dusty," he demanded, eyeing him fiercely, "do you mean to tell me the Judge knew Kitty was here and let me take it because of——"

"Sure," interrupted the other, winking broadly. "He was wise to it when we found the first bit o' lace near the bottom o' the trail, and he tells me to leave you to it, 'cause he don't want no quitters round him."

Bayou

By HAYNES TRÉBOR

JOE RAINEY was lazy. He had a shack on the bayou, and a sixteen-foot boat and a skiff, and a wife, and two kids, and a dog, and a pretty good net. As fishermen go, Joe was well off.

His wife was a good hand at doing any sort of work, even to handling a skiff with a drag net.

Joe's two kids worked in the canning factory except when Dewey, the boy, went out on a trip to the banks on a fishing smack. But Joe was lazy.

Rainey would spend his time where someone was building a new boat, if anyone was building a new boat, offering suggestions and whittling scrap pieces of lumber. If there were no boats being built, Joe either went to the wharf where the larger fishing schooners landed or up around the resort hotels, where he might be asked for facts concerning the place or to tell certain of his adventures.

Sometimes true deep-sea sportsmen with soiled white trousers and white shirt and rakish sailor hat pulled brim downward over the forehead to shield the glare from their eyes, inquired of the chances of renting boats and catching ten-foot tarpon. Joe gave this information cheerfully. It was doing something without working, and sometimes some of them saw fit to give him good cigars or other minor rewards.

These pleased Joe immensely, and he rather considered himself on excellent terms, and therefore sought to keep any information needed supplied.

Joe's daughter, Inez, called Nez because two syllables mean extra effort to pronounce, spent most of her time at the canning factory. Nez was nineteen, but she was merely an immature image of her mother.

Youth doesn't last long with these people. There is a babyhood, a hardening period, and then old age. But Nez was fairly pretty.

To just pass her one would give her credit for more beauty than most of the other girls of the village; but only if one just passed her.

Nez was peculiar, however. That is the word applied by fisher folk to a person not considered sound mentally. Some fatality of heritage or of life caused this girl to be subnormal to the other woman. Nez didn't mix with the rest of the people, and one had a feeling that she couldn't be exactly trusted. It was just her way, perhaps.

Every morning Nez walked down the path beside the bayou to the main road; and then worked all day at the factory, and walked home again. She followed the path beside the bayou again, and at night after supper sat and watched the lifeless water. When the moon shone on it the shade of black was changed somehow, and Nez often slipped off by herself to look at it.

Especially was she fascinated by the low tide. With some of the skiffs and boats grounded and the wharf pilings out of water, Nez liked to look at the fine mud on the bottom and at the shells half buried in it.

She found herself wondering one day how a dead body would look

lying on the bottom of the bayou at low tide, half covered with the fine black ooze. Nez had seen dead people. She had seen drowned men taken out of the water, and she had known lots of people of the village who had been killed in storms or at sea.

So strangely did this thought catch hold of her, that every afternoon when she came home, and the tide was low, she would stop and look for the body. Finally, however, she became tired of looking at the bayou bottoms and started coming home another way.

THAT was when Nez came to know Sid Martin. Sid was the foreman in the canning factory, with supervision over the crews that opened the oysters.

One afternoon a slip of the long prying knife, with which the oysters are opened, tore an ugly gash in Nez's hand. Such accidents happen frequently, and very little attention was paid to the girl by her fellow workers. Sid, however, passing through the shed at the time, stopped and examined the injured hand.

"Nasty cut," he said. Nez thought it unnecessary to answer. "Suppose you go wash it off and I'll get some iodine to put on it," Sid suggested.

Nez hesitated. "It's—it's all right."

"Nasty cut. Better have it doctored."

The girl was perplexed and looked at Martin, uncertain as to what to do. He took her arm and drew her up. "Come on. Go out and wash that hand. I'll be right back."

She went out to the water tap and bathed the wound. Sid came back in a few minutes with a bottle of iodine and some dressing. Nez cried when the foreman poured the antiseptic and tried to jerk her hand away, but Sid held her fingers tightly in his and twisted them so that the medicine could soak into the cut.

"There. Keep you from having a nasty sore. This oyster mud is bad stuff to get in a cut like that." He put a wad of gauze over the wound and fastened it down with adhesive tape. "Now, it's all right. Hurt much?"

Nez gulped. "Naw."

The foreman laughed.

"Does sting a bit, doesn't it? But that's what makes it good. Burns the poison out. Now, suppose you knock off for the day and beat it home and let that hand heal a bit."

The girl stared at him. The idea of knocking off early when the rush season was on had never been suggested to her before.

"Can't," she said.

"Why not?"

"Git fired. This is th' rush season."

"No, you won't. You can't work with that hand."

"Uh-huh, it's all right."

"No, it's not. You get home."

Nez shook her head. "Can't. Paw wouldn't like it."

"Why wouldn't he? Does he expect you to work with a cut hand?"

The girl glanced expectantly back at her bench.

"Can't," she said.

"Come, now. Your pap's making good runs now. We're buying all of the oysters the boats bring in, and the fish are good outside."

The girl was decided. "Can't. Paw don't go out."

"Doesn't go out? What's the matter, hasn't he a boat?"

"Uh-huh, but paw's lazy."

"Well, that's all right; it won't hurt you to knock off for a few hours. Run on home, now."

"Can't," stubbornly. "Paw

wouldn't like it, missin' three hours' pay."

"Aw, the devil. I'll not let you work. You're not supporting the family, are you?"

"Dewey works, and paw does sometimes when maw makes 'im."

"Then he won't mind you taking one afternoon off."

"Can't."

With an air of finality, the girl started back to her oyster bench. Sid caught her arm and stopped her.

"Here. What's your name?"

"Nez."

"Nez who?"

"Rainey."

"Well, listen to me, Nez. You get on home. I'll see that you get your pay for this evening. I'll not let you work. Go on home."

Nez blinked at him. "Can't," she declared persistently.

Sid pushed her toward the door. "I'll fire you if you don't. Now, run along."

The girl moved forward and stopped, uncertain.

"All right, if I git th' pay."

SID watched her go off down the main road and turn off toward the bayou, and then walked between the row of oyster openers to the office to return the bottle of iodine.

Nez followed the path along the bayou slowly. Her head hurt instead of her hand; it ached with the perplexity of thought. The tide was high and the disappointment of not being able to see the bottom of the bayou irritated her. Somehow that would have helped her to think. Like when she imagined about the dead body.

She thought about her paw. She knew what he was going to say to her. She knew what he always said. She suddenly wondered how his body would look lying in the bayou mud. The thought was not satisfactory, however, and she dropped it.

She thought about the foreman at the factory. She was still thinking about him when she got home.

Joe Rainey was on his back porch, which served as a wharf, mending oyster tongs. He stopped his work when his daughter approached and regarded her intently.

"What's ye doin' home?" he demanded.

"Nothin'."

Nez started on into the house.

"Nothin'? Git fired?"

Nez shook her head. "Naw."

"What's th' matter, then?"

"Knocked off."

"Ye did? With the rush season on an' 'em payin' good wages? Wha'd ye knock off fer? Got fired, didn't ye?"

"I hurt my hand."

"Ye mean to say ye knocked off 'cause ye scratched yer hand? And ye've lost three hours' pay and maybe yer job 'cause ye——"

"The boss tol' me to," the girl answered doggedly.

"Like hell he did!"

Joe was favoring his daughter with open disgust.

"He did?"

"Yeah, he did."

"An' ye did, like a young idiot. Didn't have mouth enough to tell 'im ye didn't want to. Course he didn't mind ye knockin' off. He didn't lose no wages."

"I hurt my hand," persistently.

"Lemme see it."

"I can't, it's tied up."

"Who tied it up? Why don't ye say somethin'? Yer like a clam; ye gotter be pulled apart to git answered. Who tied it up?"

"The boss."

Joe grabbed her arm and examined the injured hand.

"Gittin' mighty tender. What's th' matter, 'fraid o' yer hands? What's the' boss's name?"

"Name's Martin."

"Frank Martin's son?"

"I dunno."

"Most all th' Martins an' Cooks an' Thompsons is kin 'round here. Ornery low bunch. Didn't talk sweet t' ye, did he?" Joe demanded, watching the girl closely.

"I dunno."

"Ye don't! Didn't he tell ye that ye was pretty, an'——"

"Naw."

"Well, if I catch a Martin or any o' his kin foolin' with my gal, somebody'll catch hell. Jes' 'cause he told ye to knock off ye went an' did it an' didn't say nothin' 'bout losin' yer pay fer it."

"I ain't goin' to lose no pay."

"Ain't? Why ain't ye?"

"Boss says I ain't," the girl answered.

Joe snorted. "An' ye didn't have sense enough to know what he was up to, an' believed 'im. I reckin th' factory isn't goin' to pay out money to anybody what wants it. Ye keep away from that Martin feller, d'ye hear me?"

Nez turned and went into the house without answering. She was tired of hearing Joe.

THE next day at the canning factory the foreman stopped by and asked about Nez's hand. He examined it and brought her a glove to wear while opening the oysters. Nez accepted his attention silently, and when he had gone she thought about her father, and about the bayou bottom.

That night Sid passed the girl as she was leaving the shed and said "Good-night."

When Saturday came no wages had been deducted from her envelope. Sid met her on the road and again inquired about the hand. It had practically healed.

When Sid left the girl where she turned to go down the bayou path, he gave her an apple. Embarrassed, she accepted it silently, not knowing how to thank him.

With the s e t t l i n g dusk, that strange phenomena of the bayou began—the waters were singing. It had the cadence of a lullaby, sad, plaintive. The sound swelled and died as do the tones of an organ when the player moves a pedal. It came up from the waters and stirred the night air. Nez walked along the bayou path, eating tiny bites from the apple.

When she reached home the fruit was only half consumed. Nez should have remembered not to walk into the house where her father was waiting to take over her pay envelope eating an apple that she, under no circumstances, could have bought. The questioning was inevitable.

But the strange music of the black river had deepened the spell over the girl and she was partly oblivious to material things, until her father's gruff voice interrupted:

"Damn! Ye takin' money outer yer pay to buy apples with now. Gimme that money! Ain't ye satisfied losin' half a day's pay, besides spendin' the rest for trash? Ain't yer fed enough roun' here?"

The girl looked up, her eyes flashing resentment, her full lips on the verge of quivering. Years of submission to the sordidness of environment checked her emotions. She tossed the envelope to the table mutely and turned away. Joe R a i n e y snatched the small yellow packet and tore it open. He counted slowly.

"What ye been doin', Nez?" he demanded, a sneer crossing his blunt face. "Who's been payin' ye money? Huh?"

"Ain't nobody," she answered unsteadily.

It is pretty hard for any sort of a girl to bear such an accusation. She

went out on the porch that served as Rainey's wharf, and ran from the porch into the darkness of the bayou path. As she went she could hear her mother savagely reprimanding Joe, and then heard Joe's coarse, offensive retort. The usual Saturday night squabble was beginning.

Nez wandered for some distance along the bayou, struggling to control eager tears. Presently she stopped at the foot of a great live oak tree, draped in the solemn streamers of Spanish moss. It may have been in mourning for the lost souls of the sea, for the broken hearts of lovers.

The girl sat on one of its twisted roots, resting her head against the heavy, rough trunk. The tide was changing in the bayou. The music was very soft, murmuring wistfully an old uninterpreted song. It surged into the spirit of the girl, and the tears that glistened from the shadowed eyes expressed a peculiar longing that is akin to happiness.

The music brought a soothing fascination. The girl thought of the legends she had heard regarding the singing waters, and the Indian music that came from the huge shell pile just a few miles down the coast. She had heard that the sounds were attributed to ghosts and spirits. And she wondered how people knew about ghosts and spirits. No one had ever explained them to her.

Then she thought of the vaguely told stories of the bayous—how the one Indian tribe, beaten, cut down, desperate, and surrounded by its savage foes, leaped into the black waters and were drowned rather than submit to the butchery and massacre of the other tribe; how the war had been started by a princess of one of the tribes falling in love with an inferior warrior of the other. The girl and the brave had been the first to walk into the muddy stream, and the story goes that their voices lead the sweet singing.

Nez thought of that princess and that Indian boy. She wondered if the princess had opened oysters, and she wondered how their bodies looked lying in the mud.

The queer thoughts d r i f t e d through her brain, perturbing it, leading on to new perplexing concepts. Reasoning was difficult. The girl wondered futilely how people knew so much; how they had ever known about the Indians, and the music.

And then the girl felt that something was missing in her narrowed life, something magnificent that she could not explain. She thought of Sid Martin. He had seemed to know what to do when her hand was cut, and it had healed within a few days instead of becoming a nasty sore for a long time. Inexplainable emotions, ambiquities of existence. Sid could explain—things!

Late that night Nez Rainey went home and slipped into the house and into bed. Her mind was made up.

JOE usually went down to the hotel on Sunday and hung around there all day. Extra visitors were on hand and there were many men from Mobile and other places who had motored down. They wanted to fish, and Joe was willing to serve as guide.

He would return after dark, supplied with cigars, perhaps a meal or two of hotel food which he had bummed from the kitchen, and he was filled with egotistical satisfaction.

He would follow the highway from the hotel, over the lower bridge across the bayou, and then leave the road at the path just back of the shack.

Too eager to get away that morning, Joe said very little to his daughter. He grumbled sleepily over his breakfast of black coffee, grits and

fried meat grease. Then he tramped away, leaving a warning that he didn't want to hear of Nez hanging around the village during the day with Martin.

Mrs. Rainey, a weazened, angular woman of gaunt limbs, sunken cheeks and eyes, a sharp nose and thin, stained lips that were sucked over snaggled teeth, complained and scolded aimlessly all day. But the girl did not mind her mother. The woman was in reality meek. It was as if the being had been crushed and the noises she made were the whine of the breath that was being gradually forced out of her body.

Mrs. Rainey's tongue was sharp, but there were no stinging epithets delivered from it. It rattled on as might an ox driver's whip that was hung in a heavy wind—it was undirected, without cunning or purpose; it struck without intent.

Late in the afternoon, when the sun had cooled, the mother went to visit a neighbor a short piece away, trudging along the woods path in her bare feet.

Nez waited until darkness had come, and then hurried away in the opposite direction. In her hand she carried a long, slender-bladed oyster-knife. It was a particularly fine blade, and Nez prized it as highly as a surgeon might value his most delicate instrument.

She skirted the bayou, cutting down toward the lower bridge. The tide was high, just beginning to ebb. The moon showed the many skiffs turning slowly on their moorings. Within a few hours the bottom would be visible in places. The oyster shells and decaying bits of driftwood that lay half buried in the bottom muck would be visible.

If Joe had found someone to talk to, he might be another half-hour in coming.

The girl sat on the edge of the great span, in the shadow of one of the railing beams. She watched the muddy water moving sluggishly toward the open gulf.

The singing had started again, very low at first, the swells mounting, then receding; repeated, changing. There was the feeling of a primitive master. Perhaps the spirit of the eternal director led it, his hands rising gracefully as he brought out the tones—*crescendo!*—now a soft vibration, echoing obbligato of quaint melodies.

Who was the creator of this great music, and whence came his work?

The footsteps of the approaching figure startled the girl as they sounded hollowly on the opposite end of the bridge. The man was coming toward her, moving in long, heavy strides. Nez came to her feet, frightened, and uttering a low cry started to run. The oyster-knife clattered to the bridge floor.

The girl had forgotten that Joe Rainey was to come, and with the music of the water she had forgotten the sinister purpose for which she had been waiting for him. Instead she fled.

"Oh, Nez!"

She stopped, abruptly, hovering uncertainly for a moment, then turned back to face the approaching figure. The knife lay beyond the man, but Nez was not thinking of it. Instead she fairly ran to him.

"Sid," she cried, "Sid, I——"

"What are you doing here alone?" he demanded sharply, catching her arms and drawing her up before him.

"I—somethin' awful—I can't tell you what, but I can't go home. I don't want to."

He nodded.

"All right. I know. I saw Joe up at the hotel. He's very nasty; got a little likker in 'im, and saying things that ain't nice."

Nez stared at him dumbly, waiting for something. For a moment the man looked at her and then he smiled.

"Poor kid. You're so dumb, ain't you?"

"What's the matter, Sid? Ain't I——"

"Never mind. Listen, Nez. That right? Well, listen: I'm going to take the late train up to Mobile. The company told me yesterday that I can run their plant up there. It's a darn good job, see?

"Now, listen; suppose—suppose you come along. You can stay with my sister and then if you want to, we'll get married. You see?"

"I'll stay with you. I don't want to be alone."

"Yeah! Well, all right, we'll fix everything all right. I reckon you mean well, don't you?"

The girl pulled away from him, and stood looking intently into his face. Then suddenly she spoke, hesitatingly:

"Sid, what makes the bayou sing?"

Martin gave a short laugh, mingling amusement and surprise.

"Why, kid, I reckon there's fish under there what can sing," he said.

Nez smiled at him. *Sid knew!*

"Poor kid," the man said kindly. "Gosh, you're so dumb, ain't you?"

JOE RAINEY mentioned to his wife when he returned home that he had had a little luck that night. He had found a pretty good oyster-knife lying on the bridge.

Black Magic

Those who practised black magic knew several ways of destroying an enemy at any distance.

They cut a piece of turf on which the enemy had trodden and hung it in the chimney. As it would dry the enemy would waste to death.

Some cut a switch of hazel on Good Friday and thrashed their enemies with it, without seeing them. The owner of the switch called the person by name and then lustily laid about him with the switch. No matter where the enemy was, he would writhe, twist and bellow under the blows of the unseen assailant.

The commonest method was to form a tiny image from candle wax. Exposed to heat, as it melted life would pass from its original. By sticking pins into the image, the worker of magic would cause his enemy to suffer fearful agony. To slay him, a dagger was thrust through the heart of the waxen image.

Darker and more abominable mysteries were concealed behind the celebration of the Black Mass. This was a blasphemous parody of the Mass performed on the naked body of a woman as altar, with a communion cup filled with the blood of a fowl, or a newborn babe, sometimes.

The dupe who took part in this ceremony believed that the mysterious sickness which fell upon the enemy was the outcome of this unholy business. But it was too often effected by poisons secretly administered to the victim.

Talking About Snakes—

By NEIL McPHEE

IT IS built in a street of sordid aspects, but its outlook—ships come from strange lands to throw the evening shadow of their spars on its filmy eyes; and ships depart for strange lands with the eyes staring after them, dreamy, inscrutable!

It is called "The Liars' Club."

Now the Liars' Club, like the Piccadilly or Pall Mall brother, may honor a guest. In truth, the Liars' Club makes a hospitable practice of it. It might be insinuated that the members get to know each other's style of yarn, become, so to speak, desperately sophisticated, and introduce an innocent outsider in order to appreciate the full virgin effect of their art upon him. Let the insinuation pass. We are all human.

Suffice it that the outsider Bilson introduced one night was a neatly dressed, schoolmasterly little man by the name of Philip Pope. The stage being set to the last pewter tankard, Bilson began.

As Bilson went on, the gently retiring jaws of Philip Pope came farther adrift; the pale eyes starting a little from their moorings; the breath becoming uncertain as a fitful wind. He was regarded as connoisseurs might regard the beaded bubble, themselves exquisitely responsive to the effects of the very vintage they judged.

As a performance, Bilson's tale was masterly. In it a dock laborer's wife was found dead in bed one morning. Her husband alleged she was cold on his awaking. First it was considered a case of heart failure; then arose suspicion; a post-mortem; poisoning established, and the arrest of the dock laborer.

The trial was about to come off, when a detective-inspector, who had been searching the house for hidden poison, was himself found poisoned.

Two others were as mysteriously poisoned in due course.

The place achieved the popular reputation of being haunted by a dead poison murderer; but scientific sleuths were inclined to the thory that poisoned needle-points were placed cunningly somewhere in the bedroom.

Solution: small, deadly snake discovered in lining of the dock laborer's working jacket, left in bedroom. Presumed must have slipped in during process of discharging load of fruit from foreign parts.

Such a rehash is an unpardonable murdering of Bilson's artistry, but the outline is given so that the imaginative may perceive Mr. Pope mopping his forehead. Having mopped, he moistened his throat. Then in a sudden, tentative voice he completely paralyzed every member present with the amazing words:

"Talking about snakes—I was once stung in the neck in a Wapping counting-house."

You could have heard an eyelid close.

"I was, at the time," he continued, an obviously acute memory gripping him, "cashier in Jordon & Jamieson's, and lived in a small flat which I rented. In this way I had my own books and personal belongings about me. I liked books because I liked reading about foreign places; and though I've never been there as you have, that doesn't mean I don't understand."

He hesitated, but only a second.

"Now one night I was reading a book about snakes. At least, there was a snake in it as a sort of principal character. It was the story you have just told that reminded me of it. This book was a work of fiction."

Someone chuckled.

"Go on," said Bilson.

"I can't tell you the story in the book, for, as it happened, I never finished it. But I got to that point in it where one great bearded giant of a fellow was stung in the neck. The thing was really written up so well that I don't mind confessing it fairly got me. The whole affair was so vivid that I could feel—could feel the fangs going into myself, and the poison spreading, taking effect—when suddenly the door of my room burst open and two men stepped in.

"To say that I was paralyzed for a moment hardly describes it. They entered so quietly, so commandingly, hats on, sharp, pale faces — you know the type? Detectives. I just sat and gaped at them, until one of them spoke in a voice that seemed to come at me like a thin steel wire.

" 'We want you to come along to your office quietly,' he said. I don't suppose I took it all in yet, for he added, 'Get your boots on! Quick!'

"Realizing then that something desperate was really wrong, I jumped to my feet and sent my book spinning from my knees into the fire (which is why I never finished the story).

"Now he caught me by the neck, just the way a policeman does. Which, somehow made me gape again; for, as I say, I was cashier in Jordon & Jamieson's, and the next day I was due to pay the men a matter of close on ten thousand dollars, and the money was, in a matter of speaking, in my possession, for I had that evening locked it carefully away in the office safe, before handing the keys to the accountant.

"But they gave me no time to think. In fact, when I stammered out a question as to what was wrong, they promptly told me to shut up. So I began hunting my boots, until they were pointed out to me lying on the carpet at my feet!

"Yes, I was flustered. I admit it. In fact, I was in a perfect funk; which is not a pleasant state to be in. But somewhere in my mind the money obsessed and worried me. Stolen! Stolen!

"The thing made my head spin, and probably I asked some more idiotic questions, for one of them said, 'Shut it! If you speak another word'—and he put his hand in his pocket. My own mind finished the sentence—'it will be used in evidence against you.'

"But that wasn't the way he finished it at all.

"From his pocket he took instead of handcuffs or anything like that, a small blue automatic pistol.

" 'If you speak another word,' he repeated, 'I have something here that will silence you definitely. Understand?'

"Now I didn't understand. By Heaven, I didn't understand the least little bit, and continued to glare at the blue thing until they got me by the neck again. A horrible new suspicion was growing in me, and because funk had knocked any cun-

ning out of me, I let the suspicion escape.

" 'But aren't you detectives?' I asked, like a veritable child.

"THAT cleared the air so far. They suddenly looked at each other, and I saw it passing in their minds that they thought how beautifully they could have fooled this simpleton, to the top of their bent, by pretending they were real detectives. Could have had me come along like a lamb, and even to have helped them!

" 'Doesn't matter to you what we are,' said the fellow with the pistol. 'You've got to do it at the point of the revolver. That's good enough for you. Understand?' And so on, in a way that left nothing to the imagination. He was quite stark.

"I was assured that if I attempted in any way, on the street or anywhere, to say one word, or to indicate the game, or to attempt to give the show in any way whatsoever, my number was up for good and all. And I assure you I believed them. They were not the sort that talk large or bluster. Their game was big; they were taking no chances.

"My life was necessary to them, but otherwise of no other account; and could be readily dispensed with in a desperate corner.

"In fact, the way it happened, it was just about this value to them: I was to introduce them to the safe and say, 'There you are, gentlemen, please help yourselves!' "

TO each one it was plain that Mr. Pope was telling a true story and telling it without any of the reservations whereby most men cloak their most intimate fears. Mr. Pope had gripped them.

"I said before," he continued, "that funk got hold of me. It had properly. I didn't know what I was doing. They searched my pockets and took things out of them. Somehow they got me into my coat and hat, down the stairs, and out into the dark, badly lit street. A car was by the pavement. Into this they shoved me. It was a closed car and I sat between both of them in the back of the seat. Then we started.

"What might be called 'the main thoroughfares' were avoided. It was clear the driver knew his district to the missing of the last blind alley.

"As we rode on I was tortured to know how they got to know me so well; the sort of character I was, and where I lived, and so on. For I lived a quiet life, given more to adventurous reading than to adventurous living. Though that is not, perhaps, precisely true, inasmuch as I, for example, did not care to read about adventures at home.

"It was the riot and color, the heat, the snakes, the naked passions, the romance of the East, of the tropics, you gentlemen know so well, that drew me—drew me at least as far as Wapping.

"I had graduated for the teaching profession, and then this cashier's job cropping up, with its seafaring connections, with the docks, the smells, the parrots, the occasional monkey, or tarantula, or coiled snake; for, as you have mentioned tonight, there have been many extraordinary cases of snakes, for instance, being transported thousands of miles in fruit crates and what not, in the end to be the means of some shocking or mysterious tragedy.

"But I'm afraid I amplify; yet I feel I should like you to understand, if I may so put it, the conditions precedent to what was a really extraordinary affair, extraordinary beyond question, as you will presently learn.

"We drew up in a quiet street, some little distance, as I soon discovered, from my office. Naturally

they would not wish to drive right up to the doorstep.

"One of them took a flat, pliable leather case and deftly hooked it on to supports inside his jacket. The other made something else disappear; but nothing showed through their well-cut loose overcoats as they walked on, myself in the middle.

"The streets were dimly lit and looked unspeakably d i s m a l and mean. Though every paving stone should have been acquainted with my feet, though every conceivable aspect of wall, roof, and sky must surely have been seen by me at one time or another, yet as I now walked along I was chilled to the heart by a new, strange, sombre quality in them.

"The buildings, for instance, had become sinister and black and were leaning over on me. Really frightful, and not only frightful, but if you'll understand me, foreign—and —and watchful. And our footsteps were a sort of hollow, mocking accompaniment.

"Yes, certainly, my feelings were anything but heroic, and when we turned the last corner into the street in the off-end of which was the office, and I suddenly heard the policeman's footsteps coming toward us, I experienced a positive crawling of the skin.

"But as the policeman continued to come, on and on, a new curious excitation started somewhere in my throat; went down through the pit of my stomach, to my knees, leaving them quite jumpy and unsteady. A policeman; a guardian of the law; the sworn enemy of all criminals; a policeman! The excitation became nauseous. I grew light-headed and, I think, must have staggered, for I had a distinct memory of knocking up against one of the men.

"Step by solid step came the policeman; five yards, two yards, something hard poked me in the groin, and I felt an imaginary bullet tearing and ripping its way through me. I did call on some sounds, probably quite primitive exclamations, but my throat had contracted at the top and nothing came. As the policeman passed one of the men gave a little jocular laugh.

" 'By Jove, Pope, but you do hang out in a dismal hole!'

"That laugh sobered me somewhat and I began to feel my legs again. Why hadn't I spoken? Why? Why? I would turn yet——

" 'Steady!' said a small, cold voice in my very ear.

"THERE was no one about the street corner when, having been handed back my own keys, I was requested to get the door opened; requested, I may say, in a manner that made me feel a second's loss meant something like instant death. I could not find the top Yale lock. I discovered my hand was shaking like a leaf. I fumbled hopelessly, and all the time, curiously enough, I could almost have wept and cried out, so maddened was I at my exceeding folly in having missed the perfect chance of the policeman.

"Suddenly, however, the keys were whipped from me, and in no time the door was opened. We were all within, and the door was closed. The electric switch was found and the vestibule flooded with light. There was the opaque glass partition with the sliding window where tomorrow the men would be paid; would not be paid.

"For, as I said, there were close on to ten thousand dollars in the safe, all done up in little numbered envelopes, ready for issue to the men next day. Not a cent of it would be traced. All done up in bills, silver and copper. It was certainly a nice little haul. And, when you think of

it, accomplished with such ease. Mercifully, I could not think it out at the time; but just consider a moment the personal implications in the robbery personal, that is, so far as I was concerned. Or, at least, consider one little incident alone.

"Can't you see the evidence? Pope, the cashier, was seen proceeding toward the office at such and such a time, and so on. Policeman's evidence! I might have been, it is indeed probable that I was, intended not altogether as one in whose company they might approach the office with impunity; walk in at the front door after it had been unlocked for them; have the whole place flooded with electric light without arousing police suspicions, and so on; but also as the red herring to be drawn across their path! Mercifully, as I say, my brain did not work all that out at the time.

"These two men knew all about the place. They even knew, for example, that it was this one night of the week that such a sum of money was kept in the office. This one night the policeman was supposed to keep an extra eye on the office. The policeman whom we passed, joking!

"Well, there was the position. It was, you'll admit, certainly a considerable distance removed from a ruffian in a book and a snake; but life and its coincidences are mysterious, and our charts of all the currents in the brain very untrustworthy and very incomplete."

Mr. Pope took up his tankard. His pale bookish hand set itself naturally to the gleaming pewter handle. None of his listeners spoke. They had a sense of something strange impending and did not want to break the spell. Mr. Pope himself seemed to have lost all trace of the repressed self-consciousness with which he had begun. Here, it was felt, was something taken out of life, nakedly.

"The man now drew his pistol," Mr. Pope continued, "and directed me tersely to lead the way to the safe. I led the way. We entered the accountant's private hall. We entered the accountant's private room. The light was switched on. I stood where I happened to find myself, near the wall, and waited. There was certainly nothing on earth I could do now. Short of some quite miraculous interference, the office was quite as good as robbed.

"They closed the door, slung off their overcoats and jackets, and unhitched their tools. They were very swift in their actions, very business-like, and very deadly. But I, even I, who could hardly have had any sense or sanity left in me at all, who in fact had much of the feeling a bird, or man for that matter, must have when suddenly confronted at a yard's distance by a swaying, poisonous snake; even I, as I say, could see that their nerves were tense now, like violin strings. They, too, knew that they had the money within their grasp.

"The safe did not draw a smile from them, though at a less exciting moment I think it certainly would. As you know, Jordan & Jamieson are an old, well-established firm. Their safe would have undoubtedly vouched for their antiquity. Quite a magnificent, massive thing, I assure you.

"But to a modern burglar, or, as I believe he is called, cracksman, the safe merely presented a—no, not a problem, but a piece of jobbing work that could be measured to a minute.

"And now something began to happen in me again as I stood there some yard or so from the wall.

"As you know, emotions, feelings well up and down in spasms, often unaccountable spasms. But in this case it was merely the sort of excite-

ment I felt when I saw the policeman.

"It started in my throat again; a sort of irritating pulse that I felt I could ease by shouting or even screaming. It went down through the sinking pit of my stomach to my legs. Jumpy legs again and lightheaded. It was intolerable.

"You see, there they were actually starting on the safe, the safe with my packets of money in it, all counted precisely, neatly done up, and sealed; the men's money. And I had to stand, and watch, and do nothing. Stand, and watch, and do nothing! It became absolutely intolerable. The thumping of my heart was choking me. I had to do something. My whole being cried out to do something, anything.

"But it was the room itself brought things to a climax, for it began slowly to go around.

"I staggered in order to keep my balance. And at that, one of the men jumped up. Perhaps, dear heaven, he thought I had plucked up courage to attack.

" 'What do you mean, damn you?' he said, and struck me in the face. The violin strings were no doubt getting over-taut. I staggered backward, and then it happened.

"THE two cold-blooded fangs got me right in the back of the neck. I felt their points penetrate with a deadliness that was indescribably horrible; and then the cold curl of the brute's body slithering from my shoulders to the base of my skull. I felt it slither and stiffen.

"You know—you know how, when anything gets you, you jump. How an animal, for example, when shot through the heart, always jumps. So I had an agonizing desire to rise up and up beyond myself; to screw my agonized body and nerves, up and up, beyond the awful points of death.

"Infinitely futile, of course; for as I rose the buried fangs necessarily rose with me, until neither my neck nor the fangs could get any farther.

"To show you the state of mind I was in, I actually felt that the brute had in some way anchored itself to the wall and was holding me there!

"And all that, of course, in a matter of seconds. I felt the intense heat then of the poison spreading, shooting out in throbbing nerve waves from my swiftly stiffening neck. And with that sort of delirium supervened, and, as is the case in such a mental state, what I actually wanted to give utterance to was not my own personal danger, but the overpowering, nightmarish thought that they were robbing the safe.

"And now I could no longer keep it back. It overmastered me. And at last it came in a loud torrent; they were . . . 'robbing the safe!—robbing the safe!—robbing the safe!'—an agonized spate of the babble.

"I saw one of them as through a mist jump up from the safe; I heard the faint echoes of his oaths; then everything went black.

"When I came to myself," continued Mr. Pope after a moment, "the accountant's room was full of people, mostly in dungarees; men that I knew from the works.

"The works were a good quarter of a mile away behind the office. The works' manager was behind me, holding a glass of water in his hands. He had just finished squirting the cold stuff on my face.

" 'Ah!' he cried quite excitedly. 'Glad to see you pull around, Pope. We've got them here trussed like fowls. Take a drink.'

"I took a drink automatically. I was dazed.

" 'Clever piece of work,' he went

on; 'but what we can't understand is how the devil you managed it without letting them understand; without giving the show away; for they were working here when we burst in. Eh?"

"I continued to stare at him.

" 'Sorry!'

"He apologized for rushing me, but he was really quite excited. He loved a fight.

" 'The firm won't forget you for this! You can rest assured of that!'

"And," concluded Mr. Pope, with a sudden shy smile, "I am happy to say that the firm did not forget."

When a full half minute had passed it became clear that Mr. Pope, who was mopping his forehead, had really finished. At last, out of the silence, Bilson, brows wrinkling, spoke:

"But—but I don't quite follow. The snake?"

"Oh, the snake!" said Mr. Pope, eyes a-glimmer. "In the accountant's room was the old wall telephone. The holder for the receiver, like all holders, ended in the usual two points which stuck out a bit beyond the receiver itself. I had come bang up against these points and set the cold receiver slithering against the back of my neck. Then in stretching myself up and up, I had taken the points with me, just like lifting the receiver, and so had made connection. It was a private line to the works!"

Horse Whispering

It is an old story that certain men are able to tame the most vicious horse by some power not given to the ordinary man. It is said to be done by whispering a mysterious and compelling command into the ear of the horse.

Gypsies were the usual adepts, but horse whisperers are to be found in all countries. There are many of them in South America.

In the North of Scotland there was, until recent years, a secret society of men, dating from the dark ages, who practised horse taming by the whisper. They also had great skill as "vets."

One of the most famous of horse whisperers was an Irishman who had a great name throughout Ireland in the Eighteenth Century. He was Con Sullivan.

The best known instance of his taming by the whisper is that of Rainbow, belonging to the future Earl of Rosmore. Rainbow was a terror, a killer. Con was sent for and asked to be shut up alone with the horse for a quarter of an hour. At the end of that time the stable door was opened, and the amazed owner found the horse on its back playing like a kitten, with Con sitting quietly by. The racehorse was perfectly tame and gentle from that day on.

Another horse-king, Pippin, equally vicious, was entrusted to Con. After his whispering, he had the animal following him like a dog, lying down at the word of command, and without a sign of biting and kicking traits.

The knowing explain this by suggesting that some pungent ointment is rubbed on the horse's nostrils, but however the feat is done, it remains a fact, and a mysterious one.

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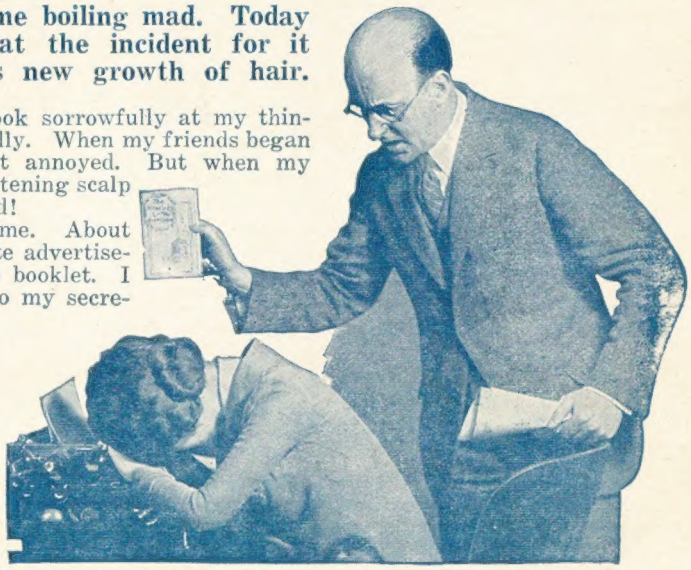
How a Strange Accident Saved Me From Baldness-

Sixty days ago it made me boiling mad. Today I look back and laugh at the incident for it brought me a marvelous new growth of hair.



WHEN my wife began to look sorrowfully at my thinning hair I smiled regretfully. When my friends began to call me "baldy" I felt annoyed. But when my secretary began to look at my glistening scalp and snicker—well it made me mad!

But the worst was yet to come. About sixty days ago I saw a tooth-paste advertisement that offered to send a free booklet. I clipped the coupon and gave it to my secretary to fill in and mail.

Well a few days later, to my utter surprise I found on my desk—not a booklet on tooth-paste—but a booklet telling how to grow hair in 30 days!

I glanced from the booklet to my secretary. I felt my blood boiling.

"Miss Harris," I said to her, "I can't say that I appreciate your sense of humor. Just what is your idea?"

She paled. "Why, Mr. Burns—what's wrong?"

"Wrong?" I shouted, "what's the idea of sending me this hint about my hair?"

Tears came into her eyes. And between sobs she explained why it wasn't her fault.

She said the coupon I asked her to mail had another coupon printed on the back—and the other coupon offered to send a free book about baldness. Well, she simply used her own judgment!

"Hm," was all I could say.

That night on my way home I read the book about baldness. It described an entirely new method of making hair grow—perfected by Alois Merke, founder of the Merke Institute, Fifth Avenue, New York. It is the only treatment I ever heard of that reached right down to the hair roots and awakened them.

As I read on I felt myself weakening in my resolve not to try another hair treatment. And then when I read that Merke actually guaranteed a new growth of hair in 30 days or no cost—well, I sent for the treatment.

The first two or three days, nothing happened. But a week or so later when I looked in the mirror I saw something that almost bowled me over! For there, just breaking through, was a fine downy fuzz all over my head.

Every day this young hair kept getting stronger. At the end of a month you could hardly see a bald spot. And at the end of sixty days—well, my worries were ended. For I had regained an entirely new growth of hair.

Read This

"My hair was coming out at an alarming rate, but after four or five treatments I noticed this was checked. My hair is coming in thicker and looks and feels full of life and vigor."—W. C., Great Neck, N. Y.

"I have used your system for eight weeks and although the top of my head has been entirely bald for six years, the results up to the present are gratifying. In fact, the entire bald spot is covered with a fine growth of hair."—W. B., Kenmore, Ohio.

(Original of above letters on file at the Institute.)

Here's the Secret

According to Alois Merke, in most baldness the hair roots are not dead, but merely **dormant.** Now to make a sickly tree grow you would not rub "growing fluid" on the leaves. Yet that is what I had been doing, when I used to douse my head with ordinary tonics, salves, etc. To make a tree grow you must nourish the **roots.** That's exactly what the Merke treatment does.

At the Merke Institute many have paid as high as $500 for results secured. Now these same results may be secured in any home where there is electricity—**for a few cents a day.**

Merke admits that his treatment will not grow hair in every case. There are some cases of baldness that nothing can help. But so many have regained hair this new way, that Merke invites you to try the treatment 30 days at his risk, and if it fails to grow hair then the trial is free. Your money is instantly refunded. You are the sole judge.

Coupon Brings You Full Details

This story is typical of the results that people are securing with the Merke Treatment.

"The New Way to Make Hair Grow," is a 34-page book which will be sent you entirely free if you mail the coupon below. This book tells all about the new treatment, shows what it has done for others, and contains much valuable information on the care of the hair. Remember, this book is yours free. And if you decide to take the treatment, you don't risk a penny. So mail coupon now. Address Allied Merke Institute, Inc., Dept. 1552, 512 Fifth Ave., New York.

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Please send me—without cost or obligation, in a plain wrapper, a copy of your book describing the Merke System.

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